

# **ZORAMTHANGI**

## **Daughter of The Hills**

**PRAMOD BHATNAGAR**

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by

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

<i>Sangzuala</i>	: Retired Assam Rifles man.
<i>Zoramthangi (Zo)</i>	: His brave daughter and main character of the novel.
<i>Robert Manzuala</i>	: Zo's brother and underground hero.
<i>Lalzopari</i>	: Her elder sister.
<i>Lalpari</i>	: Zo's mother.
<i>Thangliana</i>	: Sangzuala's brother.
<i>Lalthanga</i>	: Dare-devil killer of the underground and Zo's lover.
<i>Ajai Kapoor</i>	: Orphan boy, police officer.
<i>Father Jacob</i>	: Foster-father of Ajai and Director
	: Nirmala Niketan, Chandigarh.
<i>Ishwar Singh</i>	: Superintendent of Ambala Jail.
<i>Thanglura</i>	: Leader of the underground movement in Mizoram.
<i>Lalkhama</i>	: Father of Lalthanga and Farlawn Village Council Chief.
<i>Zalawma</i>	: Playboy son of a rich father.
<i>Lakshmi Kant Chowdhury</i>	: Inspector General of Police, Mizoram who is murdered in his office.
<i>Judy Lalmanghai</i>	: Attractive Personal Assistant of Chowdhury and an underground agent.
<i>IGP Bedi</i>	: Chowdhury's successor.



## MIZORAM

MIZORAM, IN THE LANGUAGE SPOKEN BY THE LUSHAI people, means the Land of the Hill People. It a tiny State in north-eastern India. With its lush green forests, plentiful rivers, awe-inspiring dark and greyish brown hills, its beautiful people and quaint ways of life, Mizoram tucked far away from the tearing hurry and bustle of the modern age could become an ideal holiday resort. Till the advent of the late 19th century, Mizoram was hidden from the view of the world. Then, suddenly, it came in contact with the rest of the civilisation. It was a traumatic experience, and Mizoram literally shrank in fear just as a child does when some frightening spectre breaks upon its thoughts.

The horrors that the initial contact with the outside world unleashed on Mizoram, left it puzzled, scared, awe-struck. Thereafter, life in Mizoram attained an altogether different strain. As the years flew by, the puzzlement grew and the Mizos found it

## MIZORAM

impossible to merge into the new way of life that unfolded itself before them. Nature combined with man in pushing the Mizos more and more into the depths of despair. While Mizoram had a bountiful measure of the beauties and gifts of Nature, it also had more than its share of the destructive phenomenon of the forces of Nature. A streak of lightning that brightens the dark sky, the thundering roar of a sea wave, the deafening crash of an avalanche are but brief glimpses of the power that can be at once beautiful and devastating. But *Mautam*—one such phenomenon that struck Mizoram at regular intervals and reduced it to the level of starvation—had nothing beautiful about it, has always proved destructive. At a sudden fell stroke of its all crops would be destroyed and food, which was perennially scarce in Mizoram, would disappear totally.

Aijal, the capital of Mizoram, was a small sleepy town. A large number of its fifteen thousand and odd people were mainly engaged in growing paddy—the main crop there. A small part of the population worked in Government offices and thus supplemented the family incomes. Yet another segment was engaged in trading activity since Aijal acted as the distributing centre for the far-flung areas, hampered as the system was by totally inadequate transportation facilities and a very sorry network of mud tracks and unmetalled roads.

With its dusty roads, predominance of bamboo, mud and thatched houses, and almost totally devoid of all civic amenities, Aijal was by any standard a backward town.

Our story is set in this “Land of the Hill People”.

## PROLOGUE

WHEN YOU ENTER THE GATE, THE EFFECT IS ONE OF peace and serenity. The school is located at a distance of three kilometres from the heart of Aijal town. Surrounded by lush green trees, the school has today a student population of nearly three hundred. The brown-stone building merges well with the greenery around. A surprisingly beautiful effect has been achieved by allowing the foliage to grow inside the verandahs freely, in pots and in the carefully prepared flower-beds. A bright splash of colours greets you all round the playground. About 100 varieties of orchids strike your eyes in all their glory, hung in wire containers. The small playfield is, during most of the day, teaming with boys and girls playing, cavorting and running around. Here you find no tension, no bitterness that abounds in insurgency-torn Mizoram. Here you find no dissensions and no discord between the children from the hills and the children from the plains. They stay together, study together, they live

## PROLOGUE

together. The Hostel, attached to the school, housing almost one-third of the students, is clean and well maintained. Food cooked there is simple but is not restricted to any one type. Students are encouraged to go beyond the limits of their family background, and to break the shackles of the traditions.

The moment you enter the school building, a huge board attracts your attention. On it are printed the following words :

"Go placidly amid the noise and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible without surrender, be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly ; and listen to others, even the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time. Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals and everywhere life is full of heroism. Be yourself; especially do not feign affectation. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment, it is perennial as the grass."

The Headmistress of this school is a young woman in her late twenties. The woman is beautiful, tall and graceful. Only her hair is streaked with premature grey and no attempt has been made to cover it. You will always find her dressed in a white shirt and a black *puan*,\* her hair neatly tied at the back. Her bright sparkling eyes light up when she sees the children and they in turn love her—or, will it be more appropriate to say, adore her ?

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\*A cloth piece wrapped around the body by Mizo women in the style of a long skirt.

# 1

**“CAN I HAVE JUST A HALF GLASS OF MILK, MUMMY?”**

The woman quietly got up from the bedside, rummaged in the tin can of sugar and found some little bit of sugar in it. She mixed it in half a glass of water and gave it to the girl on the bed, now emaciated, sick and dying.

“Here, my girl.”

The girl, 11 years old, rose with difficulty and took the glass. She eagerly tasted the liquid. Her face contorted in a grimace when she found it to have insipid water instead of hot, sweet milk. She flung the glass half way across the room, and fell back exhausted on the bed.

Next day, the *Mautam* claimed its first victim in the family. Lalzopari who had been subsisting on half a meal of boiled rice and Mizo sago per day—died a slow, agonising death.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Her mother's death a few days later was more sudden and presumably less painful.

When Sangzuala came back to his house, it was late afternoon, the hot sun was on its way down and long shadows were stretching further in the valley below.

"Where's your mother?" he asked his daughter Zoram-thangi, aged seven.

"She has gone to get wood."

"And where is Robert?"

"Outside. Playing."

He had not seen Robert, his son, when he came in. Perturbed he got up and went out.

"Robert ! Robert ! Where are you?" But there was no answering call. Some premonition struck him then and he rushed back inside.

"Which side did your mother go?" he asked the little girl.

The little girl was confused. She did not reply. "Zo, dear, did you see your mother going? Which side did she go?" asked Sangzuala, trying to keep the panic from his voice.

"I didn't see," the little girl answered.

"Oh God!" He rushed out again, then remembered that the girl was all by herself in the house. He stopped for a moment, and then, without turning back, he continued running down the road towards the water pump, from where a number of tracks went into the forest. As he reached the spot where the tracks divided, he stood still and shouted at the top his voice :

"Pari ! Robert !"

## ZORAMTHANGI

He heard only an echo of his own voice. Then, blindly, he took to one of the tracks and ran. Inspite of the downward slope, he was panting. His chest was pounding, his head virtually ready to split in two. A strange fear was building up into him. He went as far as he could go and realised that Lalpari could not have come that far. Turning back, he started to climb up and his progress was very slow, this time.

"O' God ! Please ! Let it not happen. This accursed famine has already claimed my daughter. Keep my son and wife safe ! Please." He was praying as he moved up slowly.

Sangzuala, now in his late thirties, was a strongly built man but the near-starvation level at which he had been living during the past few weeks had sapped his energy and stamina. On reaching the water point, he saw that Zo had come there, apparently all by herself. He asked her : "Has your mother come back?"

"No."

Sudden panic welled up in Sangzuala and forgetting his own weariness, he ran down the other track. It was not very far that he saw his wife's body lying on the ground, as if bent double because of the pain in the stomach. Robert was sitting by her side with his hands tightly clasped round his mother's body. When Sangzuala bent down and touched Lalpari, still and motionless, he knew the bitter truth at once. His wife was dead.

THE DREADED *MAUTAM* HAD STRUCK HIM TWO deadly blows within a few days. Sangzuala, beaten and shattered, wondered what further calamity lay in store for him and his remaining family—a son and a daughter. His mind wandered. Wandered to the day he had read about the *Mautam* in the newspaper. It gave all the details of the causes of the famine, how the rat

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

population multiplied by thousands and how the famine of 1959 was going to be the worst in the history of the Mizo people.

Distrubed at the report, Sangzuala had sat down; brooding. Suddenly feeling very tried, he took out his paper and tobacco and rolled himself a cigarette. He shouted for Lalpari to give him a cup of tea. Lalpari, he recalled, even at thirty-four and after having borne three children, was still tough and agile, like most Mizo women. Although some of her hair had gone prematurely grey, her face was aglow with a healthy pink. And what a desirable woman she was.

"Here's your tea," said Lalpari.

"*Kalawme !?*"\* Sangzuala said.

"What is worrying you so much?" asked Lalpari

"Huh ! Nothing."

"There's definitely something. Is it something in the newspaper?"

"Here is an article about *Mautam*. And it says the worst. *Mautam* is going to hit Mizoram this year. I am worried. What's going to happen!"

"I saw that the rice bag was chewed away last night. And the grain scattered all over the store room. As if that was nothing, the bread loaf had been eaten into. The rats are causing a lot of damage."

"Why did'nt you tell me?"

Lalpari laughed loudly at the question. But Sangzuala's face was grim. Lalpari said :

"What was there to tell you about it? Such things keep on happening in the house all the time."

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Thanks in Mizo.

## ZORAMTHANGI

“Do you realise the gravity of the situation?”

“O’ Robert’s father, what can we do? Can anyone do anything? But are you sure that the famine is coming?”

“Who can say? But there is something ominous in the events occurring around us? We are all at the mercy of Jesus Christ. Only he can save us !”

“What’re we going to do?”

“Wait and see. Perhaps nothing may happen. And if the famine comes, face it as best as we can.”

Then he remembered the cup of tea, which had gone cold by now. He drank it up in one gulp. Now even Lalpari was worried. Sangzuala spoke again after a while :

“Father used to tell me that under the spell of *Mautam*, everyone is destined to die and those who survive are the fortunate ones. During the last famine.. when was it ? Let me see... 1911 or 1912...many died, the entire crop was destroyed and there was sickness all around. There was such shortage of food that...”

Lalpari interrupted him : “Please ! Please ! Don’t repeat those horrible stories. Who hasn’t heard them.”

“Pari, let us pray to God that all turns out well.”

“What do the papers about say this year’s famine ?” Lalpari asked.

“I told you. It predicts the worst disaster for Mizoram.”

“Is there anything we can do ?”

“Obviously nothing much. We could...”

Just then Zoramthangi, their youngest daughter came running into the room, her face pale with fear, screaming.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"Daddy there is a rat in my clothes in the almirah. Why don't you kill it with your gun ?"

For a moment he felt like roaring with laughter. He, an ex-Subedar-Major of the 11th Battallion, Assam Rifles, killing a rat with a gun : He, who had seen active service in Assam and fought against the underground—yes, and killed many—should go after a rat ! And that too with a gun !"

Zoramthangi shouted again : "Daddy where are you lost ? Are you going to do something about these rats ? Daddy, please, I am scared !"

Zo's elder brother Robert Manzuala entered the room : "So ! You are scared of a rat ! Shame on you ! Where is it ? I'll kill it with my hands ! Just show me !"

Zo pointed silently to the almirah. As Robert moved to open the door, a rat darted from under his legs. Robert kicked at it so viciously and so fast that his foot caught it right in the middle of its body. The rat was flung against the wall and fell on the ground. Robert kicked at it again and yet again until it lay still—a gory mass of flesh.

Zo watched this scene terrified and ran to her father screaming. Hearing the commotion Lalzopari also came into the room and saw the cruel smile of triumph on Robert's face.

"How can you be so cruel?" she asked Robert.

"Cruel? I was only showing Zo that I am not scared of any rats as she is. Why should anyone be scared of rats?"

Sangzuala was himself quite surprised at the ruthlessness exhibited by his son. And he wanted to give a long answer to his son's last question. That there was everything to be scared about from the rats, that they were going to face a famine because of them, that...But he kept quiet. Robert was too small to understand all this.

## ZORAMTHANGI

That night Zo talked and screamed in her sleep, and had to be repeatedly fondled and caressed before she fell into peaceful slumber, by her sister's side.

Robert on the other hand was wide awake and kept pestering his father with questions. At last he said:

"Daddy, the rats seem to be worrying you much. Give me your gun and I will shoot them all."

"Oh Robert don't you worry. I'll give you the gun when you grow up. It's late; go to sleep now."

But there was no sleep for Sangzuala himself; that night and many nights thereafter.

SANGZUALA GOT NO CHANCE TO GRIEVE OVER HIS dead wife. Robert ten, and Zo seven compelled his attention. Both were at one time chubby and healthy. Now they were thin, emaciated. Their eyes, at one time bright and shining, were now covered with dark hollow rings. Was their life also to be extinguished before it had really began? Was this *Mautam* going to totally wipe out his family? It was not as if he had waited for the *Mautam* to overtake them. He had exhausted all his means. If only Lalpari had listened to him! If only! They could have quietly gone out of Mizoram and spent some months in Silchar and come back. But Lalpari would agree to no such thing. Now she was no more there.

Could he go now? Take both his surviving children and just go: That seemed to be the only escape from this accursed *Mautam*. What would Lalpari say? Would she countenance such a move? No, never! She wanted him to face the famine like the rest of the Mizo people and here he was—two of his family dead and the other three on the last steps of endurance. And the biggest question was of money. Where was the money? He had invested everything in the land.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

It was such a change from the day he had landed back in Aijal after 20 years' service in the Assam Rifles. Then he thought life was opening new vistas before him. Now in less than two years he was a broken man.

He remembered regretfully that he had always had doubts that perhaps Lalpari's judgement about the land had also been wrong. Lalpari had been in favour of the land while his brother Thangliana had argued for the tea shop. Lalpari had said :

"To own your field and to grow your rice is much more respectable !"

Thangliana replied : "*Kapi !\** Owning a tea shop is equally respectable. And if you can get the right place near some Government office, where everybody has to go, it can be very profitable!"

"It's not so certain. And profit is not everything. What will we all do? Clean up cups and glasses, make tea and hear all kind of idiotic gossip. What's so respectable about all this?"

"But you can't forget the money that's there?"

"Yes, mostly on credit. You give tea and eggs and biscuits and they will pay you when they can ! You lose a lot of money like that ! I am absolutely against setting up a tea shop."

That clinched the issue.

He bought a piece of land two miles out of the town but on the main road.

Where was the crop now? The crop of rice on which, by all calculations, he could expect a handsome profit ! All destroyed by rats ! The damned, accursed rats and the damned, accursed *Mautam* !

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Madam in Mizo.

## ZORAMTHANGI

And what plans he had ! All gone with the wind now ! Robert and his younger sister were to go to school. Lalzopari was already in school and he could easily afford the other two also, if only...And he wanted to buy Lalpari a couple of new *puans*...and some clothes for himself also. All dreams now !

The day he had found the rat hole in his field had been a shattering one. The crop had been coming up nicely, green and full. He had toiled hard and used a lot of money in fertilisers. After all, the results of his labour were there for everyone to see. He had a right to expect good returns from his field, into which he had put all his savings.

Thangliana who was visiting them in those days, had accompanied him to the field.

“How is it in Lungdai?” he had asked Thangliana.

“Not much damage yet. But you know, in the beginning there never is much damage. The storm always comes suddenly.”

“But you’re sure the *Mautam* is round the corner?”

“The signs are unmistakable. We are now in the 48th year since the last *Mautam*. The growth of rats is for every one to see.”

“How do the damned things multiply so fast?”

“You see, Zuala,\* it is all because of the seeds of bamboo flowers, which are said to be very fertile. The rats also, by nature, grow very fast. As I came to know, a female rat breeds three to six litters at a time and the young ones attain maturity in four months. A pair of rats gives rise to 30 to 60 young ones in a year’s time.”

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\*Abbreviation for Sangzuala. Mizos shorten the name using the latter half when addressing someone intimate.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"Yes, now I even remember. I read in the newspaper report that one rat can eat upto 27 pounds of food a year!"

The adjoining plot was owned by one Thansanga. He had been sowing his rice crops for the last two decades regularly and was known to be very successful.

Just as the two brothers approached Sangzuala's field, Thansanga came out of his own. He hailed Sangzuala.

"O' Zuala ! Where're you going?"

"Just to see how the crop's coming up in my field !"

"Come here ! Let's sit down and smoke a cigarette ! Who is this with you?"

"He is my brother Thangliana. From Lungdai."

All three sat down under a tree. Thansanga opened a small tin box and offered the thin, long cheroots it contained, to the other two. Both politely declined. Sangzuala brought out his own tin box and rolled himself a cigarette while Thangliana took out a small hookah. Each inhaled the smoke deeply.

Thansanga was the first to speak :

"Isn't it bloody funny that all three of us have different ways of smoking our tobacco?"

"What ! There must be at least another dozen ways in which we Mizos smoke our tobacco !" replied Thangliana.

"Yes such divergence in a piddly small population ! What is our total number? Two...three lakhs?" Thansanga asked.

"It must be nearer to two and half lakhs ! It's not just smoking, we are different in many ways," commented Sangzuala.

"And we may not remain two and a half lakhs for very long," added Thansanga.

## ZORAMTHANGI

"What do you mean?" Thangliana asked.

"This *Mautam* will claim thousands of lives and our number will go down while our differences may go up, for all I care ! If I am not there, what the hell difference does it make?" The wrinkled face of Thansanga split into a wide grin and his black teeth with stains of yellow gave him a ludicrously deathly appearance. "And just as well ! It is better to die than to remain alive on a bloody, hungry stomach."

Slightly daunted by this outburst, Sangzuala asked :

"Are you sure the *Mautam* is around?"

"As sure as any one can be. It is our fucking fate to be struck down like flies. And none of us can do a damned thing about it. You work your assess off on the land and then the bloody rats come and polish it off."

"Isn't there something we can do about it?"

"What in God's name can we do," countered Thangsanga. "It's written in our Fate. The stars decree it. No one, no damned human being, mind you, can do a thing about it !" He said with an air of finality.

But Sangzuala was not the one to give up so easily.

Lighting another cigarette, he asked :

"Can't we kill them?"

"How stupid can you be, Zuala? Kill one, kill a hundred. But how the hell does anyone kill millions of rats? Millions that grow on millions?"

"We can at least try to do something about it?" persisted Sangzuala.

"What's the use? We have been through this before and

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

what bloody things did we achieve by trying? It is utterly futile to fight against the gods! I saw during the last famine, I was a slip of a boy then—I saw men dying like dogs. Why, even dogs die a better death. Children starved till they were reduced to bones. It was just the matter of who died first. It was one hell of a time."

And now the nightmare was his own and he was living through hell. His wife gone, his daughter gone and the two children almost on the verge of their endurance. And how much longer could he himself last?

He heard a knock on the door. He looked at Robert and Zo but both of them were lying listlessly on the ground in front of his bed. He got up and opened the door.

"We are from the Mizo National Relief Front! How much rice do you need for a week?" One of the three men, who stood outside, asked him. When Sangzuala looked askance at them, one of them explained further: "We have been sent by *Pu\** Thanglura. We have some rice with us and more will be coming. We are distributing it first to the worst affected. We know, and we are sorry that you have lost two members of your family. Here is two seers of rice. And we will be back."

One of the three stayed back.

"*Pu* Thanglura asked me to convey his personal condolences. He will be coming to see you one of these days."

So Thanglura did remember! There must be something about the man! At a time like this to think of sending a message of condolences and two seers of rice, which was a luxury, was indeed a touching gesture!

That day after a long while, Sangzuala and his children had eaten a full meal.

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Mizo for Mister.

## ZORAMTHANGI

"COME AND JOIN ME," THANGLURA HAD SAID.  
"There is just no other way."

"We can surely get some help from the authorities," Sangzuala had argued. They were sitting on a bench outside the Dy. Commissioner's office, where Thanglura worked as a clerk.

"These are vague terms, Zuala. Who is Government? Who is authority? They are all men like you and me. The only difference is that they will neither be affected nor bothered."

"Why?"

"All moves will be made. But nothing much will happen. While we Mizos will die they will only click their tongues in false sympathy. Most of the officers are *Vais*,\* who have already sent their families away. They will be looked after quite well themselves. Why should they worry?"

"Does it mean that we give up even without a fight? You may be willing to do that. I am not. I am going to fight."

Thanglura was not moved: "You area simpleton Zuala but I like your spirit. You and I could do a lot together Come and join my organisation. You will find that we are not sitting idle!"

"How do you propose to avert the famine?" Sangzuala asked.

"No one can avert *Mautam*! We are governed by our destiny. And it is written there that many of us will become victims of *Mautam* this year. We cannot avoid it. But we can reduce the pain of the suffering. Zuala you have not been to villages like I have been, and in some of them the effects are already being felt. You have not talked to people, like I have, and they are just waiting, waiting for the fatal blow. You have not

Mizo word for contemptuously indicating plains-people.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

discussed with officers like I have, and I find nothing but disinterest and apathy there. In the villages, there is fear and men and women have been rendered incapable of acting. Fear feeds on rumours and our men are fatalists. My wanderings in Mizoram revealed a lot of things. Our people are simple and backward and are being exploited openly. There is nobody to check the exploiters. And in times of shortages such people thrive. Don't you know that rice is selling at three times the normal price? Do you know that traders from the plains are deliberately holding up supplies waiting for prices to shoot up further? Believe me, the picture is very dismal."

"What's the organisation you've set up?" asked Sangzuala, now fully convinced of the desperate situation. He felt highly incensed at the stupidity of it all. All the hard work done merely for the rats to devour all the foodgrains.

Thanglura was younger than himself. Perhaps thirty-five. He was a lightly-built man of average height. His thick, black hair was carefully groomed. Stub-nosed and of wheatish complexion, he had small, restless eyes but when he looked at somebody steadily his eyes seemed to bore into him. He had a squeaky voice and spoke very softly. One had to strain to hear him and give him full attention, but when he spoke with emotion, his voice assumed a peculiar, sing-song quality that could transport people into a state of ecstasy.

"It is the only ray of hope in an otherwise dismal firmament. My organisation is going to provide succour to the needy and relief to the miserable. It will provide food to the hungry, poor. We will try to keep the people's morale up and we will prevent the Cachari\* traders from sucking our blood. We will force the hoarders to disgorge their stocks and if any one, God forbid, tries to prosper on our misery, we will punish him," Thanglura said.

\*Residents of Cachar district of Assam, adjacent to Mizoram.

## ZORAMTHANGI

Sangzuala immediately became disturbed. What was Thanglura talking about; this punishment, and sucking of blood and force? Was he setting up a parallel Government or a relief organisation?

Covering up his doubts, he asked again : "How do you propose to do all this?"

"I don't propose. I have already started. We have got a large number of donations from Mizos who are doing well. We have got donations from some of the Cachari traders also..."

"What ! Donations from Cachari traders? How did you manage that?"

"Oh, we have our ways of persuasion ! I have already enrolled about two thousand volunteers for doing the work. We are collecting donations for medicines and foodgrains. When the time comes, we will be ready. My men are already visiting villages, contacting people and giving them my message. Now, are you going to join me?"

My message !

Sangzuala was nonplussed and confused. Cachari traders paying donations ! And yet Thanglura had said they were holding up stocks. Why so much of secrecy? Why so much of "my" and "I"? Why talk of punishment and use of force? My message indeed !

"I want some time to decide !" he had answered. After that day he had not met Thanglura.

But Thanglura had not forgotten !

AND THAT DAY AFTER A LONG WHILE ROBERT AND ZO slept peacefully. Now after two deaths in the family they both had their separate beds.

Sangzuala lay on his bed. Sleep eluded him. He got up and lighted the lantern. Then he looked for his tin box and rolled a cigarette. He looked across where Robert and Zo were lying, sleeping. Would they face another *Mautam*? Perhaps, when they were old.

Then he realised with a shock that even the present famine was not over. How a full belly warped your thinking! The crisis in which his wife and daughter had already died, was not over. And he was thinking of something forty-eight years hence!

He put out the lantern and went to bed. He lay there smoking. His thoughts flew back to the day when he had gone to his field early in the morning and found a rat hole. Furiously he had dug it up. Inside he saw pink, miniature rats, ten or so. He was surprised at the sudden anger that welled up within him and the ferocity with which he had made a pulp of them. Like a man possessed, he ran all over the place, his field, frantically trying to locate similar rat holes. He found none. He recalled the relief which he had felt. He had nearly choked at the cigarette smoke then. When he surveyed the field from the roadside, he found that the blades of paddy were green and the growth was thick. Well, probably, the rat holes were not there at all! The one he had found was a sort of an illusion after all. One isolated rat hole did not mean that the *Mautam* had come! Could it!

Yet, two days later, when he went there again with Lalpari, the change was so sudden, and so complete. His face was ashen and something in his voice must have told the story to Lalpari.

"Why did it have to happen to my crops?" he said aloud in agony.

"It's a famine. All crops will suffer. Yours first. Others later. It's clear now," Lalpari said as if in a shock.

Overnight the crops had lost their green and put on a pallid

## ZORAMTHANGI

hue. It seemed as if some army of scavenging insects had been all over the field. The blades were hollow and the plants dying. Lalpari was the first to speak, to break the silence :

“What’re we going to do ?”

“If available, we’ll buy rice from the market. We’ll have to wait for the authorities to get it for us.”

“To buy from the market, where’s the money ?”

“Let’s see. We will find some.” He was confident that the three hundred rupees in his post office account would come in handy and if necessary he would sell his gun.

The same evening he went to Bara Bazar. Kalyan Majumdar was the biggest trader in Aijal, he had a big shop in the market. Sangzuala knew him well and went straight to him.

“How are you, Sangzuala ? And how is your crop coming up?”

“What crop? The rats have destroyed it totally,” said he.

“We are in for bad times. No rice coming in from the plains as well.”

“Nowadays, hardly a shop shows any rice. Couple’o days back it was just a rupee and today it is exactly four rupees a seer, and that too, if you are lucky to get any at all,” said Majumdar, with a smirk on his face. Well these Mizos will learn their lesson. And he would more than make up the five thousand rupees he had to shell out as donation to Thanglura’s men. Well, yes, donation if you so please! Half a dozen young hooligans descend on you, brandish a gun and ask for a donation! Who in his senses can refuse them. Definitely not Kalyan Majumdar. Who would earn his profits soon enough. And now the time had come.

Sangzuala had returned disappointed. Lost in thoughts, he did not even know when he fell asleep.

## 2

IT WAS A HOT SUMMER AFTERNOON IN CHANDIGARH. The sun beat down mercilessly and the boy trudged on. It was sheer determination that had taken him through the more than six-kilometre walk. His destination nearing now.

Sweating profusely, he stopped inside the gate and surveyed what lay before him. There was quiet all over the compound and only in the far corner could he espied a man sitting outside what would be the Director's room. He had been told that the Director was a kind-hearted man and his only chance lay in appealing to him. The boy directly crossed over, touched the man on the shoulder and said:

“I want to see the Director.”

He is tall for his age, thought the man. He must be ten or eleven, but he is as tall as I am.

## ZORAMTHANGI

"My name is Ajai," the boy said. The man was impressed by the calm, unruffled tone. He could not be one of the boys from the Institution. His dress—old and fading shorts and oversized dirty shirt—made it clear

"Why do you want to see the Director saab?" asked the man again

"Is it any of your business?" said the boy, named Ajai, and became quiet.

Something in the face of the boy told the man that further interrogation would be futile. Although he was incensed at the boy's curt reply, still he went inside and reappeared after a few moments.

"Come."

The boy nodded to him and with just a bit of hesitation lifted the *chick*\* and entered the room. He knew that the man behind the desk was Father Jacob, Director of the Institution for Destitute Children known as Nirmala Niketan. He also knew that inside the Nirmala, Father Jacob's word was law and if he said so, Ajai's path would be clear.

"Namaste," he said to Father Jacob.

"Sir, my name is Ajai Kapoor."

"A very good name. Will you have a glass of water? You seem to have been out in the heat for a long time."

"Yes. Thank you."

Father Jacob asked for water. He watched the boy sitting in front—he was tense, perspiring, overwrought. The boy drank the water and sat calmly enjoying the cool air of the fan. After waiting a few moments, Father Jacob asked him :

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\* Curtain made of straws.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

“Yes, Ajai, what brings you here ?”

“I want to stay in your school,” Ajai said.

Father Jacob was taken aback. Never in his twenty-three years at the Institution had he been confronted with such a situation. A boy coming in all alone and virtually demanding to be admitted : Yes, they were always brought by the police or poor relatives. Children whose parents had deserted them, God forgive them their sins ! Or children whose relatives wanted them in the “Orphange” (as they insisted on calling the Nirmala), so that they will have a better education. Then, the last category was of children kidnapped for some criminal purpose but recovered by the police and whose parents could not be traced. He tried to reason with the child.

“But Ajai this place is meant for children who have lost their parents, who have nowhere else to live, nowhere to go, so why do you want to stay here ?”

“Oh Sir, I have nowhere else to live. My Mother is dead and I have no Father. And I have no one to look after me ! And I have run and walked for the last one hour to reach you. Please !”

“All right, all right ! Son, you seem to have come through a lot. You can stay here for the present.”

“Let me stay here, Sir. I have no other place. And I will be a good boy.” There was a slight quiver in his voice but he was far from beseeching.

“Don’t worry Ajai. You will stay here as long as you wish. Just now you go and have a clean bath, a change of clothes and, maybe, some rest. I will talk to you later.”

Father Jacob watched the boy go and wondered who he was and why had he himself broken all the rules for him—admitting

## ZORAMTHANGI

him without knowing his background, without knowing anything at all about him.

“SIR, MY FATHER IS A VERY GREAT MAN ! I HAVE not told this to anyone. But from you I want to hold back nothing. You see, my Father killed my Mother.”

“What ?” said an astonished Father Jacob.

“Yes, yes. That’s true. He killed my Mother and yet he is a great man, for he sacrificed himself to save her from pain, misery, agony. And he loved her so much that he was not concerned about his own life—not concerned at all.”

Father Jacob could not but admire the expression on the boy’s face—benign, peaceful, reminiscent. The boy was, for a few moments, lost in a reverie. Father Jacob did not interrupt. He waited for the child to continue his narration of a sombre, though fascinating, tale. Ajai was now looking a transformed person—freshly bathed, his hair neatly combed and dressed in a white *khadi kurta and pajamas*.\* His dark-grey eyes reflected a great hurt and pain, a hidden misery and his lean face showed a maturity beyond his years. He continued in his clear, measured tone :

“My earliest recollections of them are of one unbroken chain of happy events. They were always full of joy and I was the happiest child. They gave me their love in abundance. And Father was never happier except when the two of them were together, just by themselves. They were young, beautiful and in love. They both kept telling me how happy they were. It was like being in heaven, if there is one.”

He paused, as if to arrange his thoughts. Father Jacob was listening intently. He had heard many interesting stories and

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\* North Indian loose dress made of thick hand-spun fabrics.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

could himself hold an audience spellbound but, just then, he found that Ajai's story and his manner of telling it, allowed no flagging of attention.

"Then, one day our world collapsed. On return from school, I found that Mother had high fever and was confined to bed. They had been to a doctor and Father had gone there again to get the reports. When he came back, his face was ashen and he had grown older in a few hours. Mother, it seems, was suffering from cancer. In the next few months, she suffered terribly and Father spent sleepless nights. I would suddenly wake up in the night to find him sitting by Mother's bedside—a hope and a prayer in his eyes. Soon he stopped going to his office. You see, he was an Inspector in the Food Deptt. First it was a few hours during the day, then the whole day and the whole night—he would spend sitting there, talking, nursing her. He brought doctors, medicines but could bring her no relief. Her pains increased and she started talking of death. Mostly, I was kept away and out of her room, except when she was asleep or she called me."

Again he paused. This time the break was shorter.

"I stopped going to school as Father could not pay my fees and my name was struck off. I felt very bad and sulked for many days. But then something new started happening. There were repeated quarrels between them—something that had never happened before. Mostly it was Mother who was shouting and crying and Father who was arguing and trying to pacify her. What transpired between them, I do not know but one day Mother was found dead. Father was shouting that he had killed her. I stood there stunned when the police came and arrested him."

Father Jacob waited. He marvelled at the composure of this child. He had told the whole story dispassionately, matter-of-factly, like a fully matured person. Then he asked Ajai :

## ZORAMTHANGI

“Where is your father now ?”

“In jail at Ambala.”

“How long has he been there ?”

“Ever since Mother died. Over a year ago.”

“And son, what have you been doing in the meantime ?”

“Before being taken away by the police, father had entrusted me to his friend in the next house and told him to send me here to Chandigarh. A cousin of his stays here and he was supposed to bring me up and look after me.”

“Then why are you here at Nirmala ?”

“I am here because I hate the whole lot of them, the uncle, the wife and the entire family !”

“Such anger and so much hate is not good, specially in one so young as you, my child !”

“Sir, I do not know if it is good or bad. But I hate all of them. They abused me, they beat me, they starved me, they humiliated me in all possible ways. Still I stuck on, because I did not know where else to go. But then came the day they started abusing Father and defaming him. They said that Father poisoned Mother because he was fed up with her and wanted to marry again. Total lies ! I know the entire story and it is as I told you. My Father is a great man, Sir !”

“Then why did he have to kill your mother ?”

“He killed her out of love. He could not see her suffering. He took her out of the pit of agony into which she had fallen.”

# 3

FARLAWN WAS A SMALL VILLAGE SITUATED ON THE main Aijal-Lunglei Highway, about 50 kilometres from Aijal. In the whole village, which was located on a hill top, there were about one hundred families, most of them depending on agriculture for their livelihood. The adjoining forest, mostly teak and bamboo, was thick with wild growth. The residents of Farlawn village periodically burnt down portions of the forest and cultivated paddy there. This shifting cultivation called "*jhum*" was very harmful for the conservation of forests but quite convenient for the villagers, as plenty of wood was available for use as fuel and the ashes of the burnt down trees contributed substantially towards the fertility of the land, in the absence of any other fertiliser. The burnt out forest was parcelled out amongst the farmer families by the Village Council Chief. Each family contributed a part of the produce to the Chief as its contribution.

## ZORAMTHANGI

In this village lived the family of Lalkhama, the Village Council Chief. His son Lalthanga was ten years old that winter. He was standing in front of his father and all the boys of the village were gathered there. The morning was cold and misty. Lalkhama spoke :

"Son! Stand erect!"

Lathanga dressed in a *puan*, that reached upto the knees, a white shirt with a colourful shawl on his shoulders, long sox and black shoes, stood up. For a Mizo boy of his age, he was tall and his movements had a peculiar grace. He bowed before his father.

Lalkhama commanded again :

"You are being admitted today to the village *Zawl/buk*.\* You will follow its discipline. You will obey all orders given by the village Chief and by your Monitor. Do you promise?"

"Yes, I promise," Lalthanga said.

"I bless you."

The brief ceremony was over.

Lalkhama picked up his small bundle of clothes and along-with a number of boys moved towards the big thatch and wood structure that was the *Zawl/buk*. From today he would but be a visitor to his own house and would stay most of the time in the *Zawl/buk*. There he would be under the bigger boys and mainly under the discipline of the Monitor and rarely would his father, as the village Chief, have the privilege of ordering him about. He would be doing all the odd jobs alongwith the boys, like carrying of wood and water for the *Zawl/buk*, and doing all the jobs like digging of graves, carrying sick people to hospital and

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\* Bachelors' Home in Mizo.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

any other work entrusted to him by the bigger boys ; the *Tlangvals* of the *Zawlruk*.

Rualkhuma, aged twenty, was the Monitor of the *Zawlruk*. When Lalthanga reached the *Zawlruk*, to greet him there was Rualkhuma who conducted him to his place in the boys' corner. The dormitory was divided into three parts. One for the boys ; one for the youngmen ; and the third for the itinerants, who were allowed to stay in the *Zawlruk* for short periods.

A few days later there was to be a different kind of initiation in the *Zawlruk*. This time only the youngmen—not the boys—in the *Zawlruk* were present for a ritual. This ritual was to be presided over by Rualkhuma, the Monitor. One of the boys in the *Zawlruk* had claimed admission to the men's section and his request was to be considered over.

The boy in question was Vala.

"So, son of a gun, you think you're a man now ! Why do you want to be a man ?" asked one of the bigger ones in the *Zawlruk*, a bully named Sangliana.

"I want my rights. Why should I continue as a fag and do your dirty jobs ?" retorted Vala.

"You seem to be damned too cock-sure of your admission. Have you already measured your hair ?" Sangliana asked taking a large gulp of the rice beer, which was being consumed in plenty that day in the *Zawlruk*.

"No, no, I will give you a chance to do that !" said Vala and laughed loudly.

"Look, you bastard, till you are pronounced a *Tlangval*,\* don't be too uppity with yourself. Else I'll kick your teeth in and you'll forget your pubic hair. Okay ?"

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\* Youngman as distinct from a boy.

## ZORAMTHANGI

"All right, all right. Don't be angry. I was only joking."

"Don't joke. Go and get my shoes. And see that they are clean."

Vala was offended. To be asked to do these menial jobs on the last day ! When you had already registered your claim !

But he knew there was no choice for him. As long as he was not declared a *Tlangval*, he had to continue performing the odd jobs for the *Tlangvals*. But I'll get my own back in due course ! Don't you worry, you bullying bastard ! He thought and smiled.

That afternoon the gathering of the youngmen inside was large and boisterous. Almost every one had a glass of *Zu\** in his hand and several were drunk.

"Where the hell is Vala ? Let him come and show us that he is a man now ?" said one.

"The bastard must be hiding somewhere !" said another.

"Scared !"

"Drag him out."

"He can't escape now."

Just then Rualkhuma stepped out, raised his hand and shouted :

"Quiet please ! As you all know, we are gathered here as Vala has claimed that he is now a *Tlangval*. Vala, please step forward !"

Calmly and with great disdain for the entire gathering, 15-year old Vala, wiry and of medium height, stepped forward.

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\* Wine brewed from rice.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Rualkhuma spoke again :

"Now attention everybody. Sangliana, please bring the bamboo pipe in which you are drinking and put it on the stone here."

A hushed silence descended all around. The next minute or two would decide if Vala had really grown into a man !

In the all-enveloping silence it was Rualkhuma's voice that boomed again :

"Now, Vala show me your hand. All right, they are clean. Next, you'll pull out one hair from your pubic region and give it to me."

Without any hesitation, Vala put his hand inside his trousers, and pulled out a hair. Rualkhuma carefully took it and put it around the stem of the bamboo pipe. He joined both the ends of the hair. Suddenly a loud applause went up and every one surged forward to embrace Vala. No doubt, he had become a *Tlangval* from now on.

FROM ITS VERY ONSET 1959 PORTENDED TO BE A bad year for Farlawn. It had a severely cold winter, yet the rats kept on growing. The village Chief held a council with the elders. There was a general agreement that all efforts should be made to raise the maximum stocks of rice before the famine struck. Lalkhama himself decided to go to Aijal and see the authorities.

When the *Mautam* had destroyed all crops and other places in Mizoram suffered shortages, Farlawn fared better; because it was prepared for this eventuality. All the youngmen in the *Zawlruk* were asked to go to the forest to hunt for jungle yam and roots. These alongwith the rice available were used quite frugally and

## ZORAMTHANGI

the likelihood of any major crisis was averted. Lalkhama was acclaimed as a good Chief who had led his people well, and successfully, through a difficult crisis. The villagers had heard harrowing details of people dying due to starvation after marching for eight days in search of food, and of the sickness spreading around in many villages. They were thankful that they were spared any such calamity.

One day the Chief called his Council members and the Monitor of the *Zawlruk* to his house for a meeting. Opening the discussion, he said : "I have received a message from Aijal that Thanglura, who is the President of the Relief Front, will be coming here to our village tomorrow. We have been asked to arrange for a public function for him."

"Why is he coming here ?" Rualkhuma asked.

"Generally speaking, to meet us all, talk to our villagers, I think. I haven't been told, but that's my impression. But when I went to Aijal, Thanglura was being mentioned as a man of action, who was determined to save Mizoram from the famine."

"But we have been lucky here, *Kapu*.\* What does he want from us now ?"

"I don't know. But there is nothing to worry. No harm in listening to him !"

One of the councillors, an old man in his seventies, started slowly : "*Kapu*, whatever you say is good for us. But I don't like what I have heard of Thanglura. He is out to create trouble. And our village can do without it."

"What sort of trouble ?"

"I don't know. But I have heard vague rumours."

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\* Sir in Mizo.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Lalkhama dismissed the company, saying : "Oh, don't believe in rumours. Get moving. And see that everyone in the village is at hand tomorrow."

Early next morning Thanglura arrived in a jeep. He was accompanied by three of his colleagues. Straightaway he said he wanted to speak to the Chief alone. When the others left, Thanglura began :

"*Kapu*, I am glad that your village has escaped the ravages of *Mautam*. But other villages have not. To help them, I need your help."

Lalkhama noticed that Thanglura gave the impression of a freshly bathed man. His black, shiny hair carefully groomed, his white shirt with its stiff collar, his tweed jacket and his polished black shoes, all built up the impression of a man very meticulous about his appearance.

"What help can I give you ?"

"I need volunteers for my organisation. We are engaged in providing relief to the needy. We need men to go to our far-flung, badly connected villages."

"And do what ?" asked Lalkhama.

But Thanglura did not seem to be short of men, he thought. Even while they were talking, the three men kept waiting outside.

"Oh, to do all kinds of jobs. Talk to people, spread our message, collect funds for our organisation, distribute help and guide our people to help themselves."

"These are laudable objectives. I will see what I can do."

"I need five men to start with from your village. They should meet me in Aijal day after tomorrow."

"Look here, *Pu Lura*, I have only said I will try."

## ZORAMTHANGI

Thanglura interrupted him : "No, *Kapu*. I am certain you will succeed. Five men, day after tomorrow, at Aijal." There was a certain coldness in his voice that disturbed Lalkhama.

"And now let us go for the meeting," Thanglura said.

Thanglura's speech that day was indeed a rousing one. He spoke for almost an hour in front of a spellbound audience consisting of nearly the entire village. It was a speech that people remembered for a long time. Thanglura's opening words were :

"Your village is among the few which have not felt the onslaught of *Mautam*. You are the fortunate ones, the favoured of God. You worked hard and you deserved your reprieve. But for how long ? The next famine or the next may not spare even you. Outside Mizoram, no one realises the magnitude of our suffering. They do not even know that we exist. Why should they care ? What is common between the plains-people, the *Vais* and us ? The authorities have failed to provide any relief to our suffering brethren. The *Vais* live comfortably while we starve."

While Thanglura spoke on, Lalkhama listened but he was still feeling agitated at the tone of finality which Thanglura had adopted with him. He felt a strange fear gripping him. Thanglura had asked for men as if he was asking for a few kilograms of rice or a few hundred rupees' contribution.

"It is for you to work hard and get over your hurt and your suffering. I have no easy solutions to suggest. The road for us to prosperity will be a long one and many sacrifices will have to be made. The fight has just started. The fight will have to be carried on, without caring for the cost, for sacrifice, for any sacrifice. I want you today to be ready, from today itself, for such a struggle !"

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Many in the audience could not know the import of these words. Clearly, Thanglura had something up his sleeve, which he was not spelling out, thought Lalkhama. Rualkuma thought: What a speaker! Words simply flow out of his mouth. And young Lalthanga thought : I would like to work for a man like him. Will I ever be like him ?

"I have been all around Mizoram," Thanglura was saying. "I have seen people die of starvation. My close friend lost his wife and daughter in the famine even though in our neighbouring areas, there was food in plenty and was in fact being wasted. But, do not lose courage. Our destiny is undergoing a change. Look after your children who will be our soldiers. I say our soldiers of tomorrow. And look after the fields which will feed our soldiers. God, be with you. You will hear again soon from me."

There Thanglura drew, indeed, vociferous applause and prolonged cheering for such an inspiring address. But while leaving the village, one of his accompanying colleagues, went close to Lalkhama and whispered softly : "Day after ! Don't forget. Five men !"

IN A VERY POOR FAMILY, IN A SMALL HAMLET, called Bukpui, was born 35 years ago a boy named Thanglura. His father a petty farmer had hardly any money to educate his two sons. Thanglura was sent to the village school, where the eyes of the priest fell on him. He realised immediately that Thanglura was a boy with an extraordinary intelligence. He decided to offer him a scholarship and sent him to a missionary school at Jowai, near Shillong. The Second World War shattered the dreams of the young boy to complete his education. He discontinued his studies and joined the Army as a clerk. Demobilised soon after the war, Thanglura returned to Mizoram and tried to continue his studies. In 1954, he joined the District Council office at Aijal

## ZORAMTHANGI

as a cashier. But this did not satisfy him. He was yearning to do something spectacular for his people, who, he knew from his experiences in other parts of country, were far more backward and far less protected. But his own options were limited. He could sense the resentment, latent amongst the tribesmen of Mizoram, but how to harness it ? The impending 1959 *Mautam* gave Thanglura the opportunity. Seizing it, he quickly spread the word that the *Mautam* was imminent but the sufferings of the people could be averted. only if the authorities moved in time. He whipped up popular discontent and soon assumed leadership of the angry youngmen, who played their own part in spreading stories of neglect and havoc caused by it to the Mizo people. A number of retired Army personnel joined his organisation. Funds were now collected and soon a hard core in the organisation started on collecting weapons. It was also decided that youngmen should be admitted in the organisation and given training on the use of arms and guerilla tactics. Nobody in Thanglura's office noticed that he had been more and more staying away from his office. And nobody noticed that he was spending more and more of his time in secret conclaves with his growing circle of friends.

Thanglura went round Mizoram consoling the people, assessing the damage and enlisting recruits. His own village was virtually wiped out as all its inhabitants, in the absence of any food articles, had shifted to larger villages nearby. He was highly critical of the measures of relief attempted by the authorities. He saw with his own eyes that men had to walk upto 25 kilometres to get 20 kilograms of rice and walk back the same distance, to reach back to their homes.

"I saw that inter-village paths were under construction for paying people so that they could buy rice ? But where's rice ?" he addressed his friends.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"I was at Lawnglai village when the aeroplane came to drop rice. Most of the bags split on contact with the ground and many were untraceable. Why waste precious rice like this while our people are starving ?" he addressed another group.

His visits made him extremely popular with the people but disenchanted him totally about the administrative system under which his people were compelled to live.

"REMOVE ALL HIS TRACES FROM THE FACE OF EARTH. Traitors shouldn't be allowed to live. Kill him, quickly and silently !" This was Thanglura. He was sitting in a small room, in his own house. There were five other men in that room, all older than him except one, whom he accosted :

"Men like Laimana should be made examples so that others will fear to follow him."

"Won't you say what Laimana's crime is ?"

Thanglura's face flushed red. But he knew that it was important to keep his team united. He could deal with the wavers later on.

"Oh well, yes, yes. I should tell you that Col. Laimana was one of our three top commanders in Lunglei. He has been passing information on to the police and has been caught."

"How was he caught ?"

Thanglura controlled his rising anger with difficulty.

"Well, you see, our men noticed that Laimana was living rather expensively and his shirts were of the latest cut and also very expensive. So he was put under surveillance. It was found that he was delivering some letters to a particular house in the town through a boy. The third time, the messenger was intercepted. And do you know what was found ?"

## ZORAMTHANGI

“What ?”

“The letter gave details of our arms deposits near Lunglei. Obviously, the letter was meant for the police and Laimana was being paid for giving the information.”

“What happened then ?”

“I ordered Laimana to be kidnapped and brought here to me.”

“But he escaped ?”

“Yes. He is now in Aijal. He will be flushed out. Our men are on the job. But the message should be passed on in clear, unmistakable terms !” He looked at the youngman named Rualkhuma, who had been one of the volunteers from Farlawn. Rualkhuma got up, put on his overcoat, picked up his Thompson machinegun and walked out. It was only while going that Rualkhuma noticed the armed guards around the house.

Inside, the curious friend was not willing to give up.

“What did you do with the arms *caches* ?”

“Oh, they were shifted to other places. Now I think there has been much too much of discussion already on an undeserving subject as that of Laimana. Let’s get down to business. As you all know, for some time now our die has been cast, our bridges burnt. We were left with no choice. The suffering of our people which we all saw, made it imperative that we do all that was in our hands. So, today we finalise our plans. Now we have got powerful friends who are willing to give us money, material and all the help we ask for.”

The room once again got enveloped in silence. Nobody spoke as Thanglura waited, looking at the dim, lone bulb burning in the room. He got up, peeped out of the window and saw

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

that the six guards were at their job. Sadly he realised that he wouldn't be able to stay in Aijal far longer. It was becoming too risky.

Then he continued :

"Our friends abroad cannot provide us with men. So we have to get a larger number of our youth involved in our movement. I will like you to consider this in your deliberations tonight."

Again he paused. His eyes scanned the four men in the room. And the two revolvers and the two Thompsons lying by their side. They would know only when going out that the house was already well guarded and there was no need for them to be tense. But he could not afford to allow them to relax also. No precaution was too much.

He said : "Though we are not short of funds, our collection drive must continue, the collections must increase. No one can tell about the future. We should nurture the system."

The meeting continued till the early hours of the morning.

THE DAY NEXT WAS CHRISTMAS. IT WAS IN THE evening that Thanglura's security agents received word that Laimana was sitting at a tea shop in Bungkawn Bazar. A "silent killing" was what they had been ordered to execute. Laimana started walking towards the jail and immediately realised that he was being trailed. On reaching the jail gate, he suddenly turned back and started running, catching his pursuers by surprise. One of them got close to Laimana and tried to fire at him at point-blank range. The trigger jammed and Laimana escaped. When told of this, Thanglura was furious. They could not afford such lapses.

## ZORAMTHANGI

The search was intensified. It was only after a week, on New Year's Day, that Laimana was sighted again. He was accompanied by a boy about nine years old.

One of the security agents challenged him.

"Laimana, your time has come. Let the boy go."

Laimana shielded himself and held on to the boy. The security agent kept walking towards him. When he was about 10 yards from Laimana, the boy broke loose and ran away. At the same instant Laimana swiftly jumped down the road. The agents fired at him recklessly and two of the bullets caught Laimana on the head. The underground could not afford to miss him this time. Laimana was dead. And Thanglura's message rang out loud and clear. Traitors won't be spared !

# 4

WHILE AJAI WAITED AND GOT HIMSELF ACQUAINTED with the Nirmala Niketan and its inhabitants, mostly boys in his own age group, Father Jacob made his own enquiries about him. He wrote to the jail authorities and promptly received a two-line letter from Ajai's father authorising him to keep Ajai in Nirmala and declaring Father Jacob to be his sole guardian. The last sentence was touching indeed : "I have failed Ajai, but he is a good boy and he will understand."

Ajai was admitted to a school nearby and immediately proved to be a brilliant student. He was well mannered and courteous. He was, however, very quiet and rarely mixed with the other children. Whenever Father Jacob could spare time, Ajai would go and sit with him. Father Jacob encouraged him to talk for he knew that this was the only way in which Ajai would get rid of the venom that was stored inside him. He understood Ajai's

reluctance to mix with other children and did not force him in that direction, for he knew that time, the best healer of all wounds, would, in its own time, rub this pain off the hurt that Ajai had suffered at so young an age.

After that first day, Ajai neither talked about his father nor mentioned his name.

Father Jacob was intrigued by the character of Ajai's father. Why didn't he at least write to his son? Why had he shown no interest in what his son had been doing for the last one year? Why had he in the first place killed his wife? What sort of a man was he? What future had he planned for himself? And, what for his son?

Vexed and perplexed by these and numerous other stray but loaded questions of the mind, Father Jacob finally decided to go to Ambala and find out the answers for himself.

So, Father Jacob without telling Ajai, took a bus from Chandigarh early in the morning. He reached Ambala Jail at about noon and asked to see the Jail Superintendent. He was asked to wait at the huge wooden gate through which the wardens entered by a small rectangular opening. The armed man in the sentry post looked bored and kept staring at Father Jacob. Why had this *padri* come here, he wondered. Father Jacob felt a bit ruffled by his unblinking stare and smiled at him. The sentry gave him only a blank stare in return. Just then, the small door opened again, and to his relief, Father Jacob was called inside.

Ishwar Singh, the Jail Superintendent, known to his subordinates as "Super Sahib" was a short, squat man. He must have been about five feet four inches tall but weighed not a gram less than eighty-five kilos. His thick head sat on wide, powerful shoulders and there was hardly any neck beneath it. But he was not fat. Regular, hard exercise had obviously kept him in

trim. His heavy, thick wrists spoke of enormous strength. The large eyes with bushy brows were alert and the big moustache which he wore over his thick lips gave him a rugged, forbidding look.

“Are you the same Father Jacob, who wrote to me some weeks back? Why, yes, you must be! How could I forget?” said Ishwar Singh as soon as Father Jacob entered his room and the greetings were over.

“Yes, Mr. Singh, I am the same person. His son stays with us. I was wondering if I could be permitted to see him for a few minutes?”

Ishwar Singh laughed loudly, his white, even teeth gleaming. Father Jacob was taken aback by this behaviour of the rather uncouth person sitting before him. But Ishwar Singh spoke quickly; the smile lingering on his face.

“If I was in your place, Father I would leave such a meeting for later.”

“Why do you say so?” Father Jacob was puzzled.

“The poor bastard is dead, that’s why. You can’t meet him in this jail, that’s why.”

“Oh! God rest his soul in peace. When did it happen? How?”

“One question at a time please! And before we go into all this, will you care for a cup of tea? Or something cold perhaps?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Singh. I wouldn’t dream of wasting your time, except that I want to ask you a few things about Ajai’s father.”

“My time, as it happens, is fully pledged to these fellows both living and dead. I have still to complete all the reports on Jitendra Kapoor—that was your boy’s father. And an enquiry

## ZORAMTHANGI

is going on. So don't you worry about my time. Your two questions are already with me. And you will, I am sure, ask many more. But what about tea first?"

Without waiting for Father Jacob's answer, he shouted : "Oey Putra !\* Get us two cups of tea. Hot. No Sugar for me. And better be quick about it !"

Then he pulled out a bundle of Bidis from his drawer, took out one, muttered "You wouldn't care for one of these", and proceeded to carefully light it. He held the Bidi between his teeth, then pulled at it and blew out a thick billow of smoke. Then he said:

"Now, Jitendra Kapoor died last month on 16th. He died of his own hand—hanged himself in his cell. That is so far. The damned enquiry, the stupidity of it all, will probably uncover something else. I doubt it though if in this case, even the Magistrate can manage that. They always come out with the story of official negligence and all that sort of thing."

"How did it happen ?"

"On 15th night he went to his bed as usual—but obviously not to sleep. He had managed to keep a small blade hidden somewhere. You see, we have over four hundred prisoners here and such things do happen. He cut his blanket into shreds, made a rope out of it and hanged himself in the bathroom. He was found only in the morning—dead."

Tea came. It was brought by one of the convict wardens. Ishwar Singh took his cup and sipped the tea with relish. Father Jacob did not touch his cup. Ishwar Singh looked up surprised.

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\* Sonny in Punjābi.

"Come on, have your tea, Father," he said.

"I don't feel like it. Please."

"I know, I know. You don't feel like drinking a cup of tea because you have heard of the death of a man you did not even know. But Father, I knew Jitendra Kapoor. The likes of him are rarely seen in this jail. He just did not belong here. I liked him very much—kind, helping, always affectionate—maybe I loved him, if a man can love another. But he is no more. He is where he would like it most. I am sure he is happy. Now come on, let's drink tea to his happiness." He laughed loudly, guffawing for long, unable to control himself. When he looked at him, Father Jacob's hand automatically went to the cup and he took a sip. The tea was too sweet, but tasted bitter in his mouth. He asked Ishwar Singh :

"Did he ever mention his son, Ajai ?"

"No, never. Not until I received your letter. When I told him about your letter, showed it to him—he was visibly relieved. I remember his words : "Saheb, please send this letter. My son is in good hands now." He signed his letter to you here, in this office. Three days later he died."

"Why did he kill his wife ?"

"Father, I am not much educated. But he was. He said that he only wanted to relieve his wife of her misery. Mercy killing, he said. No one else would do it, and he said he wouldn't allow anyone else to do it. Yes, he used a difficult word for his action. What was it ? I wrote it down somewhere to check its meaning. Yes, here it is. E.U.T.H.A.N.A.S.I.A. I never got to do it. What does it mean, Father ?"

"It means bringing about of death in the case of an incurable disease," Father Jacob said, not a little surprised at the

## ZORAMTHANGI

systematic way in which Ishwar Singh worked. Then he asked : “What was he convicted for ?”

“He was convicted for culpable homicide not amounting to murder and was sentenced to three years’ rigorous imprisonment.”

“Was the trial a long one ?”

“No. He confessed. It was all over in two sittings.”

“How did he pass his one year here in jail ?”

“It appeared to me that he was waiting for something. He was very quiet, very obedient. But waiting.”

“What could it be ? News of his son ?”

“Yes, maybe.”

“Why was his son not informed ?”

“He left a suicide note. He expressly forbade information of his death being passed on to his son.”

“Was any of his relatives informed ?”

“Yes, his cousin in Chandigarh, whose address we have, was informed. But nobody came. We had to perform his last rites here. We do it quite frequently.”

“Mr. Singh, one last question. Did he leave any message, anything at all for his son ?”

“No. Nothing.”

“Well, I am very grateful to you. I took a lot of your time. Thank you, and God bless you.”

“Thank you Father. Maybe I will come to Chandigarh sometime and meet his son.”

# 5

“DOT ! DOT ! DOT ! DASH ! DASH...”

Throughout the night of 28th February, the signals in Morse code were exchanged between the various villages. The messages were passed by the time-worn system of torchlights flashing across the distant hills. The Mizo villagers had by now become experts in this unique method of inter-village communications.

“10 bamboo tubes to be sent to Champhai.”

“100 pineapples to be sent to Serchhip.”

“Arrange 20 peaches for Kolasib.”

So went the messages. “Bamboo tubes” were 3” mortars, “pineapples” were hand grenades and “peaches” were 2” mortars. Secrecy was being observed even in the secret messages.

## ZORAMTHANGI

It was this element of surprise, that brought about the triumph of the underground on 1st March 1966 when they simultaneously attacked the government offices and installations at many places in Mizoram.

The government offices in Aijal were located in a cluster in the heart of the town. The Deputy Commissioner's office and the Treasury were located on a hill top and facing it was the Supply Office and the District Council Office. The Office of the Superintendent of Police and the Commanding Officer of the Assam Rifles Battallion were also nearby. The stretch of road passing through this part of the town was part of the only metalled road in Aijal and was its busiest throughfare, specially during the office hours.

That evening there was an air of hushed expectancy in Aijal. Something was afoot. But nobody knew what. As the evening turned into night and people retired to their beds, groups of the underground moved about surreptitiously and took up positions. The cold, foggy night made their task easy, rendering detection very difficult. A similar movement was being carried out in other towns of Mizoram.

Thanglura was closeted with his top advisers and checking out his last moves. He issued orders with military precision.

Near the Power House, shortly after midnight, one of the volunteers burst his hand grenade accidentally and was blown to smithereens. As if waiting for this signal, the town simultaneously reverberated with sounds of shelling and gunfire. A platoon attacked the Treasury and without much resistance carried away in a jeep twenty .303 rifles and Rs. 20,000 in cash. The Telephone Exchange was attacked and the lines disconnected. Far away in Lunglei the SDO was kidnapped, and in the eastern city of Champhai, the Assam Rifles Camp captured.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Close on the heels of these incidents, Thanglura with his top aides disappeared in the thick jungles and no one except the men with him, knew his whereabouts.

The fighting continued over the next three days. The underground had overrun the whole of Aijal city except the Assam Rifles post. The Post Office, the Civil Supply Office, the Telephone Exchange as also other government offices were captured without much resistance. Most of the administration officers were confined within their houses by armed men of the underground. The Radio Station also was now under their control.

Public announcements blared forth that Mizoram was now a free country and its citizens were the masters of its destiny. For five days Thanglura's writ ran in most of Mizoram. Hidden away in some remote jungle, Thanglura issued his orders which were relayed by the torch system or through messengers. While he and his men deliberated over what to do next, the people had a foreboding of the retribution that was bound to come. They knew that Thanglura's sudden takeover could only be a short-lived affair before the power of the State asserted itself. The subject was discussed widely but because of the fear of Thanglura's men, the discussions were confined to small groups and trusted friends.

"It should be only days before the Army comes in."

"Yes, then what will *Pu Lura*'s men do?"

"They don't have the strength to oppose or even face the Army."

"They'll disappear in the jungles, just like their leader."

"And we'll be left to face the wrath of the Army."

"But surely they'll have sense enough to see that none of us has anything to do with this uprising."

## ZORAMTHANGI

“You forget that with the gram we grind the insect also... !”

“Whatever you say, Thanglura’s act has been a courageous one !”

“Then why is he hiding in the jungle ? Why doesn’t he come out and face the Army?”

“Maybe he’ll come out at the right time.”

“But just now the Army will come out in full strength!”

Thus the action of the elusive Thanglura was being discussed all over Mizoram.

Then, suddenly, all hell broke loose. The planes came, dropped their bombs and went away. They came again, and yet again until the main market was razed to the ground and several of the houses and shops were burnt to ashes. Just as the planes ceased coming, large convoys carrying the Army reached Aijal after a nerve-racking journey over steep inclines and sharp curves. Quickly they established their dominance and took control of all the vantage points and vital installations. Curfew was imposed and largeseale arrests of the “hostiles”, as the undergrround were now called, made.

The seige of Aijal was over.

## ZORAMTHANGI WAS NOW FOURTEEN YEARS OLD.

Immediately after the tragedy in her family in the *Mautam* year, Sangzuala had sent her away to Shillong and got her admitted to a school there. She had come to Aijal recently. Robert Manzuala, her brother, had refused to leave Aijal and was studying in the Missionary Convent School. On that day, she was sitting outside her house, after preparing the morning meal,

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

waiting for her father. "Outside" meant nearly on the roadside as almost all Mizo homes are constructed either by cutting the hill along the slope or by building supports with bamboo stilts on the valley side of the road. Zo was cleaning some rice and watching Robert play football on the road with some of his friends. Robert had grown into a strapping youth, tall—he stood nearly five feet ten, and lean. His long hair did not hide his sharp darting eyes and his long frame did not hinder his swift, graceful movements. He was hardly serious about his studies and was in the same class as Zo though he was three years older than her.

She saw the object in the distant skies and wondered if it was some big bird. To her it appeared like an eagle in flight, small and dark against the clear, blue sky. But there was something wrong. Its wings were not flapping. It gradually became bigger as it drew nearer. Slightly disturbed now, she called out to her brother.

"Robert ! Oh Robert ! See there in the sky ! Something funny out there !"

"Aha ! An aeroplane. Never seen one before ?" bantered Robert.

"Don't pretend as if you have ! There is another ! And another ! My God ! How many of them are there ?"

As she continued to gaze, she saw that from the belly of the aeroplane were dropping in quick succession objects that appeared at a distance to be huge black eggs.

And then she heard loud deafening explosions one after the other. Not knowing what was happening she continued to watch fascinated, as the second plane came closer, dropped similar objects and vanished into the sky. More explosions

## ZORAMTHANGI

followed and she saw the house across the road go up in fire. She rushed inside her own house, confused, found everything in order and coming outside heard the same droning sound. Twice the planes came back and more explosions followed.

Sangzuala came running down the road and on seeing her cried :

"Oh thank God ! Zo, you are all right ! Where is Robert ?"

"He was here just now. Daddy, what's happening ?"

Without replying, Sangzuala ran, looking for his son.

At her wit's end, Zo followed him. They found Robert standing in front of a house, which was burning. He was sweating because of the heat and was staring vacantly.

"Damn them ! Damn them ! The bloodsuckers," he kept muttering to himself.

Just then somebody moaned inside the house. Sangzuala heard it over the crackle of burning timber and rushed inside. A boy was lying in a corner of the room, obviously dead, his body crushed and his clothes splattered with blood. His eyes were open in a glassy stare and his face was twisted in a pained, dead expression. Then he heard the moan again and when he looked in that direction, he saw a woman, fallen to the ground, and unable to move. She was screaming in pain. Sangzuala moved near her and tried to lift her. It was then that he saw blood oozing out from a gaping hole where her right arm had been. Even as he withdrew momentarily in shock, the woman's head rolled to one side. She was dead.

Sangzuala heard a whimper behind him and saw Robert staring at the dead boy. A solitary tear rolled down his cheek as he whispered :

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"He was playing with me till a few minutes back. And now he is dead."

When they came out, Robert's eyes were red, but dry. His face had a strange wooden expression.

"Daddy, why do they do it ?" he asked.

"Our men started it and now they are attacking us."

"But we had no bombs."

"It's a war son ! Once started, it is fought to the bitter end."

"It is unfair Daddy !"

"A war is always unfair, Robert."

"Why kill innocent people ? What had my friend and his mother done to die like this ?" Somehow he could not bring himself to utter the name of his dead friend.

"In a war, the innocents also suffer. That is how it always is."

The scene around them was one of death and destruction. Sangzuala's house had also caught fire. It spread so fast that it was well nigh impossible to retrieve much from the burning house.

A Mizo house is constructed mostly out of dried bamboos and wood and is as inflammable as a heap of dry leaves. Many of the houses which were directly hit by the bombs had collapsed in shambles and almost all were burning. Men, women and children were running here and there, confused, trying to save those caught inside the burning houses. There was no way of putting out the fires as water was all the time in short supply in Mizoram. The fire spread quickly and the flames leapt up engulfing the whole locality.

## ZORAMTHANGI

Zo was dazed. She had never seen so many dead bodies and she had never seen such confusion. Many of the wounded were being brought out from the shattered houses and were being carried to the small hospital nearby. She sat, absent-minded, watching the scene quietly. She did not know how much time had passed.

Suddenly she heard a drone, similar to the one she had heard when the planes had arrived. This time she was genuinely alarmed. More aeroplanes? What was now left for them to destroy? Perhaps, they were coming back for her! Yes, that must be it! Her eyes full of fright and dismay, she ran to her father, down the street.

"Daddy, Daddy! The planes are coming again," she shouted.

Sangzuala paused for a moment, listened intently and then said :

"No! These are not the planes. This is the sound of trucks climbing up the road."

Within minutes, a convoy carrying the troops passed by. Zo sat and watched, fascinated, as one truck followed another. This went on for some time.

Zoooomm...Zoooomm...

They would come up the hill, pick up speed, and disappear round the bend.

**THE TRUCKS CARRYING THE TROOPS WENT STRAIGHT** towards the Treasury and the office complex. The news of the bombing and the impending arrival of the troops reached the Treasury area, they were welcomed by the deserted buildings, which till an hour ago were in the possession of the underground,

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

who had received orders to vacate the buildings. Thoroughly outnumbered, the underground returned from their bastions without any fight.

The civil administration returned to its offices, and set about the task of reconciliation.

“ROBERT ! ZO ! I WANT TO TALK TO YOU BOTH TODAY ! Sit down and listen to me carefully,” Sangzuala said to his son and daughter. It was a week or so after the return of the civil administration. Sangzuala’s house had been burnt to ashes on the day of the bombing attack and all the three of them were staying in the house of a friend in down town Khatla.

The room in which they sat was a small one, which for the past week was all the accommodation they had. It was sparsely furnished. There was a cot in the corner on which Sangzuala slept during the night. The other two slept on the floor.

“Look you two are now my only interest in life. I now look forward to seeing the two of you happy in life. That’s my only objective.” He stopped and cleared his throat: “You are now old enough to understand the problems of life. We are today in an unenviable situation. We have lost our house, we have lost everything that was in it. The only thing we have is the land, my pension and some cash in the Post Office. What do we do now ? I want your own views so that we should take a decision that would be best for all of us.”

Both kept silent. They had never had a discussion like this with their father. Always it was he who decided things in the family. Many a time they did not like it. But Sangzuala’s words that day came as a surprise. He had been unusually quiet during the past few days and now they realised what was worrying him.

## ZORAMTHANGI

Zo was the first to speak.

“Daddy, you have always taken the decision like this before ! Why can’t you decide now ? Whatever you decide will be in our interest.”

“No, Zo it is not like that ! I am not fighting shy of taking any decisions. Yes, but I feel time has now caught up with me. One can only take this much, and no more.”

“Daddy, please don’t talk like this, for our sake at least. Time is the best healer,” Zo said quoting from her book.

“Ever since your mother died, Zo, I have been very lonely. I can’t tell you how lonely. She used to give sound advice. Still perhaps the idea of staying in Aijal during *Mautam* was not so good. I seem to do all things wrong. In the absence of your mother, I don’t know with whom to discuss my problems, if not with the two of you.”

“What have you in mind ?” Zo asked.

“As far as I see, we have two alternatives—we can stay on in Aijal and cultivate the land that’s there. But I’ll have to find money for the house. The other is to shift to Lungdai where my brother lives and where, he tells me, we can get some land cheaply.”

Zo said after some thought : “I am for staying in Aijal. After all we have stayed here since birth and this is like a home to us. You and Robert work on the land and I will look after the house. Robert and I can also continue our schooling here. Obviously the question of my going back to Shillong does not arise now.”

Robert who was till now listening spoke out : “I am not interested in school. Nor am I interested in tilling the land to have it destroyed by the rats in a moment. And for that matter

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

nor am I keen to stay in Aijal after what I have witnessed here. What has it given me in the past that I can hope for something better in future ? My mother died, my sister died, my house has been destroyed, my friends killed—as for me, I can take no more. Let's quit and go to Lungdai, where we can make a new beginning.”

Sangzuala was confronted with a difficult choice. It was not easy to give up a life which he had led for years together and setting up anew in another village will entail its own problems. At the same time it was a hard decision to make to stay on in Aijal with little to look forward to. He said to the children : “Okay, I know your minds. Let's wait for a day or two before we decide.”

His next visit to his land made his task simple and his path clear. With the large number of Armmen coming into Aijal, almost all the open spaces were taken up by them for setting up their camps. Open spaces in Aijal are in any case very few. So, many of the fields nearby were occupied for this purpose. Sangzuala’s field was one such When he wanted to meet the officer-in-charge of the Army unit, he was told that he should see the Deputy Commissioner. There he was asked to apply in writing. When he insisted on meeting the officer and explaining his case, he was taken to the Administrative Officer, a Mizo, with long years of service. He told Sangzuala that he could do something only if a written petition was made to him. Sangzuala said : “*Kapu*, this is the only land I have. I and my two children survive on the earnings from this land. What will I do if the Army takes it over ?”

“That is for you to decide. The Army needs that land and they have to take it. You will be paid sufficient compensation.”

“I don’t want any compensation. I want my land back.”

## ZORAMTHANGI

"You cannot get it back. So be reasonable and take whatever you can get for it."

"What will I and my children do?"

"Take the money and start some business. Or do something else. I cannot help you beyond that."

Finding no other alternative, Sangzuala put in his application for being given compensation for the land acquired by the Army. A fortnight later he was called and paid Rs. 2,000 for his land. He protested that his land was worth much more and that it was plain and simple robbery to give him so little for his land. The clerk who was offering him the money said that he should consider himself lucky that he was getting any compensation at all. Angry and frustrated, Sangzuala quietly took the money, signed the receipt and left.

That same week, Sangzuala, Robert and Zo moved with their meagre belongings to Lungdai.

# 6

RUALKHUMA, THE MONITOR OF THE ZAWLBUK WAS one of the five volunteers sent to Aijal to join Thanglura's forces. Vala took over from him. Vala had that year been declared as the best hunter in the village and was the automatic choice for the Monitor's post.

Lalthanga had meanwhile graduated from the boy's section to the men's.

And ever since he had been looking for an opportunity of proving his manhood by doing more than just measuring his pubic hair. The opportunity came soon. One evening he and Vala were sitting in the *Zawlruk* with two others, Ramlhuna and Lalthuna.

"Today I saw Malpui in her true colours," Vala told the gathering. "She was entertaining one of her clients."

## ZORAMTHANGI

“What did you see ? Please tell us the details,” pleaded Ramlhuna.

“All three of you are mere boys, even though you are admitted in the *Tlangval* group. Telling the details will only spoil you.” replied Vala.

“No, no ! Let the chance come and I will show you my mettle !” Lalthanga said.

The others beseeched Vala to tell them the details.

“Okay ! Okay ! It so happened that I was passing from behind the cottage of Malpui, when I heard raucous laughter from inside. I peeped in through the window and saw Pachhawna, that old widower, sitting at the table and drinking *Zu*. His other hand was invisible.”

“Where was it ?” asked one boy.

“Inside Malpui’s blouse. And it was not idle. He was kneading the ample breasts of Malpui, who was sitting at his feet and cooing and laughing,” Vala stopped to see the effect of what he was telling on the other three boys. All three were tense, eager, expectant.

Then one of them could wait no longer and asked :

“What happened thereafter ?”

“You can’t wait to hear the end, you little brat ! But let me tell you that I was looking at them from some distance and I could only see what was visible from the window. So don’t expect too much !”

“Oh, please do continue with the story !” said Lalthanga.

“Story ! Really ? It is a story ? Damn you, what I’m telling you, I actually saw. If I wanted to tell you a story...” Vala was visibly angry.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"I didn't mean 'story' like that. I meant the narration. I'm sorry," Lalthanga interrupted.

Pacified, Vala continued :

"After some time I saw Pachhawna get down on the floor. Easily he opened her blouse and undid her *puan* and was fumbling with his own clothes, when the bitch got up and came towards the window. She was naked. But I could only see her round, full breasts. I went mad with desire to touch them. Then I got alarmed ! Had she seen me ? And then thwak.. she closed the window. I could see nothing after that."

"Damn it ! Damn it," said the boys in frustration, almost in unison.

"What is this 'damn it, damn,' you are doing ? Imagine my plight ! You are only hearing a story. I was seeing it all ! When the window closed, I almost got mad and broke it."

Lalthanga was the one who came up with the idea. And he got unanimous support after he had explained his scheme.

"Let's *Zawn* her !" Lathanga said

"What ?" asked Lalthuna who at 16 was the youngest of the group.

"I said, let's *Zawn* her."

"What do you mean ?" persisted Lalthuna who did not know the meaning of *Zawn*. Vala knew and he marvelled at the boldness of the suggestion. As far as he knew *Zawn* as a custom had been given up for many years and perhaps there were no cases in recent years. But the idea appealed to him.

"In the old days," explained Lalthanga, "if a girl was known by all the villagers to be a common prostitute and bad character, the youngmen would carry the girl either outside the village

## ZORAMTHANGI

fence or into the village street or into the forge and would then all rape her in turn. *Zawn* is a very old Mizo custom."

"All right. But we must be careful of one thing," said Vala always cautious, always taking over the leadership; being the Monitor of the *Zawlruk*. "Only a limited number of boys will go. And those who go will be sworn to secrecy. Then, even if she decides to report, it will be her word against ours."

"What limited number? I think the four of us should be enough," remarked Ranilhuna.

"Okay then! In exactly fifteen minutes we go. And one change we will make in the old custom. We will not take her anywhere but the house itself would be good enough. I'll be the leader okay?"

Nobody demurred.

One by one they slipped away and stood near Malpui's house. It was around 5 P.M. The single door to the house was locked from outside. Obviously Malpui had gone out. The four decided to wait. Lalthanga lit his cigarette and sat back, waiting.

It was probably half an hour later, when it was nearly dark that Malpui returned to the house. She stood for a moment, took out the key and opened the door. As she went in and was about to bolt the door from inside, Vala and Lalthanga banged against the door and covered her mouth with a towel. The other two boys also came in and bolted the door. Malpui struggled a bit but knowing that she had no chance against the four men, and seeing the *dao*\* hanging from the waist of Vala, she kept quiet. She decided that her best chance was to get hold of that *dao*.

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\*Sharp and heavy curved hand-made iron weapon.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Then Vala spoke to her:

"Look there is no point in struggling. You'll enjoy what's going to happen. More than with Pachhawna. After all he is not young any longer."

He released Malpui, who had by now recovered from the initial shock and was fully composed. Quietly she asked :

"How do you know about Pachhawna?"

"I know about him and also about the others. If you make any trouble, it will be bad for you. I won't hesitate to use this *dao* for mutilating this beautiful face of yours."

Malpui was about twenty-five years old. She was not beautiful but had a peculiar, robust charm about her. She had shoulder length hair and was fair of complexion. Of middle height, she wore her blouse with the top two buttons always open, her breasts tantalisingly visible. She had a long experience of men and boys and her success had been due to her discretion in not discussing any of her friends with anyone and keeping her affairs secret. She was surprised at the mention of Pachhawna's name and knew immediately that she had blundered somewhere. She also realised immediately that in whatsoever manner today's episode ended, she would have to move out from the village. She could not stay in a village where her name was mud. But it would be a shameful day for her if she allowed these four boys—or, at least, one man and three boys—to cause any harm to her.

"What do you want?" she asked.

It was then that Ramjhuna, who was eighteen, jumped on her and while Vala and Lalhanga held her hands he raped her. Vala took care to see that Malpui did not scream. Lalhuna and Lalhanga followed. Lalhanga for whom it was the first experience with a woman, came before he could enter her. He got up, his

## ZORAMTHANGI

face red with shame and ran out of the door without waiting for anyone. Vala was the last.

Vala gave a final warning to Malpui and went away. Next day Malpui left the village.

IT WAS SOON AFTER THE 1966 REBELLION THAT A posse of policemen came to Farlawn and went straight to the house of Lalkhama, the Village Council Chief.

"You are required for interrogation by us. You will have to accompany us to Aijal," Lalkhama was told.

"In what connection?" Lalkhama asked

"We are not at liberty to tell you."

"Then you will agree, that I will be within my rights to refuse to go with you."

"No, we don't think so. It will be in your own interest to cooperate."

"Please try to understand. You cannot come and pick up somebody and whisk him away just like that," Lalkhama protested.

"Look Lalkhama—we want no trouble ! You have argued enough. Now you better accompany us quietly. Otherwise we have our orders to bring you at any cost."

"At any cost ? Why have I become so important suddenly ?"

"Okay, since you want to know. You have been providing men to Thanglura and he has been waging war against the Government. You should now consider yourself under arrest. So, get moving."

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

It was then that Lalkama realised he was in bad trouble. He adopted a pacificatory tone and said to the Sub Inspector who was the leader of the police team :

“All right : But can’t you ask your questions here and be done with it ?”

“You are now under arrest ! And we are taking you to Aijal ! Is that clear ? Now get going,” the Sub Inspector, at the end of his patience, shouted.

“Give me a few minutes. Let me talk to my family,” Lalkama pleaded.

“But be quick about it.”

The Sub Inspector, who was standing near his jeep, waited for a few minutes but Lalkama did not come back. The officer’s eye caught a movement down the street and he started running towards the man. He was sure it was Lalkama. His men followed him. Lalkama ran towards the village church. The Sub Inspector could see that he had a gun in his hand. Slowing down he asked his men to surround the church building, a small stone-and-corrugated tin-sheet structure.

“Lalkama ! You are covered from all sides. You better come out,” the Sub Inspector shouted.

No response.

“Lalkama, I am warning you. Come out.”

No response.

“Lalkama, do you hear me ? If you don’t come out within a minute, I will put the building on fire.”

No response.

But a bullet whined past the Sub Inspector. He fell to his

## ZORAMTHANGI

feet immediately but before he could do so, something hit him on the right shoulder and he was lifted off the ground and fell on his back.

He screamed in pain, then shouted to his men : "I have been shot. Get inside that building and catch the bastard !"

All the men, six of them, entered the building from the single door, shooting as they set foot inside.

No response came from inside. The policemen moved in slowly, cautiously. No sound could be heard, no movement seen. There were a few benches in the medium-sized room. The policemen ultimately found the bullet-riddled body of Lalkhama under one of them.

By the time they came out, there was a small crowd outside the church. The policemen put the dead body of Lalkhama in the jeep, picked up the injured Sub Inspector and bolted from there before any further trouble. But the villagers were roused. Angry that their Village Council Chief had been shot dead like a common criminal without being given a "chance" to defend himself. The villagers were highly incensed that the killing should have taken place in the church.

That night the police post, the only symbol of authority in the village and which was manned by two constables and one Head Constable was burned down and all the three policemen were shot dead. Vala, Lalthanga and eight other occupants of the senior section of the *Zawlruk* went underground and established their liaison with Thanglura's force.

The day next an Army platoon arrived. The whole village was placed under curfew. The *Zawlruk* was disbanded and the boys driven back home. There was no senior member left. The building housing the *Zawlruk* was taken over by the Army as its permanent headquarters in Farlawn.

## 7

"AJAI, WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GROW up ?" Father Jacob asked him one day.

"My Father wanted me to become a doctor. But after having seen you, Father, I want to be like you."

"Why like me ? I am a small man, doing humble service, in the name of God ! You should aim at something big."

"If I can follow in your footsteps, it will be a great thing for me. I do not know what can be bigger than you. You have given a new life to me, and to all of us here."

Then Father Jacob remembered that ever since that first day, when he had come to Nirmala, Ajai had not mentioned his father except in the conversation now. He debated within himself if he

## ZORAMTHANGI

should tell Ajai about his Ambala visit. He wondered what kind of bond existed between the father and the son. What had given Jitendra Kapoor the faith that his son was happy in Nirmala ? What gave him the confidence that his son was in good hands and that he could die peacefully ? What was it that kept Ajai, who had obviously a great admiration for his father, from talking about him, from even enquiring about him and from ever writing to him ? Tentatively he said: "I went to Ambala the other day."

For a moment Ajai raised his eyes, as if he was going to speak. Then he kept quiet. Again, after a few seconds, he said : "It must have been very hot on the way."

Father Jacob then decided to leave the things as they were. "Yes. But the journey was pleasant. On the way to Ambala, the man sitting next to me was a talkative gentleman and the time passed quickly, mostly listening to his humourous anecdotes. By the way, son, your teachers in school speak very highly of you. And I am very happy with your performance."

"Thank you Sir ! Thank you," said Ajai delighted.

"AJAI WHY DID YOU HIT HIM ?" FATHER JACOB asked gently, not in anger.

"Father, I am sorry. I did not mean to hit him so hard."

"That does not answer my question. Why did you hit him at all ?"

"He abused my father. He called him a murderer. I tried to avoid him but he wouldn't let me be. I was left with no choice."

"Ajai, it is wrong to raise your hand against another. You are only twelve. Om Prakash is much older and bigger than you. He could have hurt you."

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"Father, it is not as if he didn't try. He has been after me ever since I defeated him in the race that day when the minister came. I am very sorry Father and doubly so since you have been bothered. I am prepared to apologise to Om Prakash also."

"There will be no need for that, son. I will talk to him myself. You go back to your room, wash yourself and come back to my room. I will discuss your subjects with you."

Later, when Ajai returned, Father Jacob said to him : "I have talked to Om Prakash. There would be no more quarrels between the two of you, I hope."

"Thank you, Father. I assure you that such incidents will not happen again."

"Now, Ajai, your reports for the final examination are good, very good in fact. You have to decide now whether you want to go for the Arts or Science. What is your choice ?"

"Father, I will do whatever you say."

"Yes, but what is your own preference ?"

"I would like to go for Science."

"Okay. Good. But you should know now that after your matriculation, you would have to go and stay in a hostel as the only college nearby has only arts subjects. But that is not a major problem. We will look after that."

"Can't I go from here to the college everyday ?"

"No, no. It is too far. And it will take up too much time."

"In that case Father, I will take up arts subjects only. I cannot think of going to a hostel, away from you."

## ZORAMTHANGI

"Ajai, my son, so much attachment to a mere man is not good. You must not think of me!"

Suddenly he stopped. He realised that Ajai's mind was not with him. For a minute or so there was complete silence in the room. When Ajai spoke, it was with an effort :

"Father, were you referring to my parents?"

"No. No, my son. I was not referring to them."

"But they fit your description."

"Yes, maybe, they do."

Once again he thought that it would be best to tell Ajai about his father. He decided that the boy was strong enough to take it.

And so without any preface he said : "Ajai, my son, you may be sorry to know that your father has been dead for some time. I did not tell you earlier..."

"Father, I know. You did not tell me earlier because you thought I would not be able to bear the news. But Father, your love has made me strong and I can take anything. You should not have worried."

He went away to his room then, quietly, unagitated. When Father Jacob went there after some time, he found Ajai lying on his bed, his eyes closed, sobbing softly, his hands folded in salutation to God. Father Jacob did not disturb him. He must be allowed to come to terms with his grief in his own way. And Father Jacob thought "the earlier, the better".

AJAI PASSED HIS MATRICULATION EXAMINATION with a First Division. Again the question arose regarding his future plans.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"Father, I want to be like you. Please show me the way."

"Son, you are chasing a mirage. You do not know the pitfalls in the way of the life I have adopted. It is difficult, it is lonely."

"I am not afraid Father," said Ajai, now 14 years old. "I want to serve the poor and the needy. I want to be able to help those who have none to help them—like you helped me."

"You can do these things in many other ways. As a matter of fact if you want you can do it anywhere. You have the will, you will find the way. And I will not like to force you one way or the other. You are still young. Perhaps in due course you will choose your own way of life. Let us not decide the issue in a hurry."

"As you say Father. I want to ask you one thing. Why did you adopt this way of life?"

"It is a long story Ajai."

"Please, tell me Father."

"Let me tell you this much that I have seen so much suffering, so much misery and so much pain that I have almost become immune to it. No pain affects me now. The details would be burdensome," he stopped abruptly.

When Ajai looked up, his eyes showing only admiration, Father Jacob continued slowly : "It was nearly 35 years ago when I came here, this was a small village. I had a small boy with me, then two years old."

"Your son?"

"Yes. My son. I had no one else in this world. I had left my place because of the fearful memories it had for me and for my son. I came here and built a small house. Nirmala was the

## ZORAMTHANGI

name of my wife and in her name I started here this Institute with three boys, including my own. The beginning was the most difficult as I had to tend to every need of theirs'. Three more boys came and I could not say no to anyone. With the opening of the school, where you studied, my problem became a bit easier. I could send the children there, right across the road and they were kept busy during the daytime. The village was growing, too, and the money with me was limited. I was wondering what to do. Then once more the lightning struck. It was, I remember, a cold, foggy morning. January 1953 it was. My son was going to school and while crossing the road, he was knocked down by a truck. He died, even before I could reach him."

Father Jacob paused, but only for a moment, and before Ajai could say anything, he continued :

"Again, I decided to cut myself adrift and go away to some remote corner. But the faces of the twenty odd children, who were here, for whom no corner of the earth was available, who depended so entirely and so innocently on me, would just not leave me. Their faces just swam before my eyes—you know, go out from one side and reappear on the other, as if on a picture screen. I decided to stay on."

He looked at Ajai, whose eyes were wet. He patted him on the back, smiled and continued :

"But bigger than my own problem, was the problem of money. I did not want to stretch my hands before the government, or anyone else. My own resources were at an end. But I had faith in God. Relief came in the shape of a childless couple who had heard of Nirmala Niketan. They wanted to adopt a child from here. I did not, at first, know what to do. Could I part with one of my own children? Would it be proper to let him go into a strange household? How would he fit in there?

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

So far children had only come here. No one had gone, except my son. All these doubts racked my brain. But then I thought—what future could I offer them? Supposing something happened to me? Would they not be happier if they could go into the care of a welcoming family. So they took away Rajesh from here."

"Was he happy to go?"

"Not at first. But then he understood And I believe he has had no reason to regret. The couple were obviously very rich. For, a month or so later, they donated, fifty thousand to the Nirmala. Soon the same couple came and adopted another boy. This time, the father set up a trust and from that day onwards I have had no problem of money for the Institution. Many of my wards have grown up, got married but most of them have not forgotten Nirmala. Now donations come even from sources unknown to me. And we are an Institution with a name, with a reputation."

"It is all because of your..."

"No, no. One may be vain enough to think that one is indispensable—as I thought I was. But it is never so. There have been helping hands, everywhere. Now we have our own building, we have nearly a hundred boys living here at one time."

"Don't you feel happy, at what you have been able to achieve?"

"I am only an instrument in the hands of God. What I feel happy about is when I see boys like you, boys who have grown up here and can rub shoulders with anyone in the service of humanity."

# 8

IT WAS A PARTICULARLY DARK NIGHT THAT DAY. AN occasional streak of lightning flashed across the firmament and momentarily lit up the whole village. Rain had lashed Lungdai village that morning and the temperature had suddenly fallen. A mild breeze added to the chill.

The whole village slept peacefully, oblivious of the three dark, unrecognisable silhouettes moving stealthily towards Sangzuala's house. As the three men approached the house, the door was opened by Sangzuala himself, as if on a cue. Quietly one of the three visitors, the youngest of them, pushed past Sangzuala and entered the room. He looked around, peeped into the other rooms, which were dark, and then stepped into the bathroom. All this he did in 30 seconds flat and then nodded to the man who was obviously the leader of the party, who smiled at Sang-

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

zuala and entered the room. The third man stood outside with the door ajar while the youngman whispered to Sangzuala :

“Where is the other exit?”

“Come this way.”

The man followed him and then stood guard at the second exit. Both the guards were armed with machineguns. All these preliminaries were over quickly and only then the two men, now left in the room, Sangzuala and his guest, embraced each other and then sat down facing each other.

“So Zuala, how are you? It has been years since I saw you,” said the visitor.

“I am fine *Pu Lura*. And how are you?”

Thanglura, for it was he who was visiting Sangzuala secretly, and at the dead of night, replied :

“Managing to live. It has been a precarious existence but exciting. Lalthanga, the boy at the back door is, you know, a bit touchy about my security. He takes no chances. I hope you didn’t mind !”

“No, no. Not at all, But I can assure you that you are safe in my house.”

“I know. That boy is a real devil. But, well, I hope your children are not eavesdropping.”

“They are fast asleep and they wouldn’t disturb us.”

“Robert must be a man now. I have heard well of him. When do you intend giving him to me ?”

Sangzuala smiled wryly but said nothing.

"And how is our dear Zoramthangi ? What does she do ?"

"She is fine. She goes to school. And having no choice, she looks after the house. Does all the work. We manage a hard existence."

"Yes, yes. I know. The *Mautam* hit you badly. The days after were also no good. Not for you. Not for me. Not for anyone of us. I was hunted and chased. But they were mistaken if they thought I would give up. My people have reposed their faith in me and I will not betray them. It is a tough struggle. But we will win one day. Have you now settled down here in this village ?"

"It takes time, Pu Lura. But we'll manage."

"I am glad. Do you realise that in spite of what *Mautam* did to you, you are much better off compared to many of our countrymen ? Many families became destitutes after the *Mautam* and haven't recovered at all. Many lost their breadwinners in the war and have yet to get over the trauma. They have just given up. They don't want to fight. But I want to awaken them. I want them to fight for the freedom of our land. I want to kindle the fire in their hearts. I want to remove poverty from our midst. I want our people to be happy. And, Zuala, I want your help for this. Will you give me your hand ?"

"What do you want me to do ?"

"You see my men are scattered all over. But many like me have to be continuously on the move. In normal times we would have managed but the Indian Army is controlling most of the area. They are keeping a watch on our people. Unless I provide arms to my men and arrange regular training for them, we will fail in our goal. We need money for all this. We are getting some from friendly countries but that is not enough. We must generate our own resources."

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Sangzuala interrupted him :

“Look *Pu Lura*. There has been some mistake. I would be glad to help. But I am a poor man myself.”

Thanglura laughed softly, carefully. Then he said : “I am not asking you to pay anything. I want you to collect a tax from the people of your village. The details are given in this paper here. You know everyone well in the village. You fix their share according to the guidelines given here. Ask them all to pay by a certain date. My men will establish contact with you and collect the money.”

“This is dangerous work. What if the Indian Army comes to know ?”

“All of us are engaged in a great task. Don’t tell me you are scared of the dangers ! And your position is already sufficiently compromised. If they come know of my visit here, they will catch you. But don’t worry. Who’s going to tell them ?”

Sadgzuala still looked a bit uncertain. Thanglura gave him no chance. He got up and said : “Okay. It’s settled then. You will have no trouble from the villagers...I’ll see to that.”

Then he whispered softly “Thanga”, stepped out through the back door and vanished into the darkness outside.

SANGZUALA AND HIS FAMILY HAD BEEN STAYING IN Lungdai for some months now. The initial difficulties were got over with the help of his brother Thangliana. Sangzuala was given a piece of land near Thangliana’s house for constructing his own house. To this task all of them set about earnestly. They got all the help from the villagers and soon Thanglura, Manzuala and Zoramthangi shifted to their new house, consisting of three small rooms, a bathroom and a kitchen. Zo joined

## ZORAMTHANGI

the local school but Robert refused to do so and decided to help his father in the field.

Lungdai was a picturesque village situated on a hill top, as most of the Mizo villages are. At the bottom of the hill was the river Dhaleshwari, which flowed in a majestic torrent during the rains but adopted a calmer course during the rest of the year. Small flat-bottomed canoes plied in the river ferrying across men and material. A journey in one of those boats was always a risky proposition as no one knew when the river would throw up one of its hidden currents and upset its delicate balance. Yet the residents of the village had to perform such a journey frequently as many of them had their *jhums* across the river. A narrow footpath ran down from the village to the river.

On the other three sides of Lungdai there was thick forest-land. While pine predominated, local species like *gomari* and *karoi* were also in abundance. Wild boar, *sambhar* and hog deer were plentiful while clouded leopard *mithun*\* and Malay bear were not unseen. The forest abounded in varieties of birds—hornbills, peacocks, hill mynah and the racket-tailed drongo. Through the forest, at the back of the village, was a six-kilometre long mud track which connected Lungdai with the main road between Aijal and Lunglui, the two district towns of Mizoram.

Sparingly populated, Lungdai now had a population of about two hundred families. It was a big village by Mizo standards. And it had—unlike a Mizo village—a church, a school, a dispensary, a market and even a small playfield where the Sunday football matches were popular. The school was located at one end of the village at the highest point and was good by general standards. Every Saturday people from the nearby villages on the riverside flocked to the market to purchase items of necessity and to sell their wares.

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\* A cross-breed game animal.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Zoramthangi proved to be an able manager of the house. With the responsibility of a full household thrust on her at the young age of fourteen, her childhood was prematurely over. Except for the five years which she had spent at Shillong—a period free from care—her life had been affected by so many tragedies that there was more pain to think of than joy. This had developed a hard streak in her character and whatever task she took in hand, she completed with a typical thoroughness. Her day started early in the morning. The morning chores consisted of washing the clothes, taking a bath, preparing the meals and then rushing off to school. She would eat her own meal during the school-break which was sufficiently long for her to run over to her house and gulp her food. Her return from school was followed by a visit to the forest to collect firewood. In this, Robert accompanied her sometimes. The evening meal was again an early and simple affair but as the Mizos are fond of fresh food, she could do her books and studies only in the night.

Not for Zo the gossiping and chattering of a teenager. Not for her the games young girls play. She would not attend any of the dances in the village. Normally a beautiful girl like her could have had a train of boys courting her but she encouraged no such diversions. Her world was for the present, firmly revolving round her father, her brother, and her house.

Sangzuala was faring well in his field. With the single-minded devotion that he was able to give to his land and the amount of physical labour that he and Robert were able to put in, he soon became one of the most prolific growers in the village.

Both father and son made frequent forays into the jungle. One of the prized possessions of Sangzuala was his .12 bore shot gun which he had purchased during his service days. Sangzuala and Robert embarked on their hunting expeditions with great glee and a lot of preparation. They would spend hours together in

## ZORAMTHANGI

trailing their prey. Sangzuala had taught Robert not only the use of the gun but also the laying of traps. One of the favourite traps of Robert was a dangerous one, even for the hunter or the unwary passer-by. A young tree is bent down to the side of a path, across which a big noose is laid. The end of the noose is fastened to the tree and is so arranged that an animal passing releases the sapling and is suspended by a fore or hind leg some 10 or 15 feet above the ground. While explaining this method to Robert, Sangzuala told him a story.

“Two sepoys of the Frontier Police had been told to take an important Dak. One of them had lingered behind his companion in some village and on following him the latter came upon his rifle lying on the path. He first thought that some wild beast had killed his companion but one look at the ground showed that there had been no struggle. He then hunted about for his companion for some time and at last was attracted by a moaning sound overhead. On looking up he beheld his companion hanging by the leg from a tree. Luckily the man had succeeded in slightly drawing himself up by holding on to his thigh and so kept the blood running to his head, but he was so exhausted from shouting for help for so long that he could only moan now. He was soon brought down.”

Robert laughed loudly on hearing the story.

“The fellow must have been nearly dead by then.”

“Yes, nearly. And there is nothing to show that he was particularly keen to go out into the jungles after that experience.”

“What is your experience with snakes, Daddy?”

“Oh, snakes are the writings of the gods. No harm must be done to them. Any harm caused to the snakes is punished by the gods.”

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Robert had become an expert with the gun and in fact improved to such an extent that soon he became a better shot than his father. Whenever they returned with a wild boar or a deer or in rare cases a *mithun*, a community feast was arranged.

Robert's interest in farming soon started flagging. He would spend hours in the river swimming aimlessly or he would sit and chat with the known hunters of the village and ask them the ways of trailing a prey or measuring the height of an animal. Or he would just wander into the forest and study the bridle paths. He invented a new game for himself. When the nights were pitch dark he would roam the forest for an hour or two without trying to remember where he was going. Then all of a sudden he would try to reach back to his house in the quickest possible time. He also became very good at the football games played every Saturday and was his team's main scorer. Not finding much to do in his spare time, he took up work with the Assam Rifles units as an odd job boy. This brought in some extra money and gave him something to keep himself occupied. This also gave him a fair excuse to keep himself away from working in his father's field. Robert had by no means chosen his career. He knew that he had to wait for some time before he joined his vocation—which, no one knew as yet.

SANGZUALA COLLECTED RS. 500 FROM THE VILLAGE that month. When he told the people that the "tax" was being collected for Thanglura and at his bidding, they paid willingly. Thanglura's men—two of them—came to Sangzuala one Saturday evening and asked him for the money. They asked him only two questions :

"*Pu* Thanglura wanted to know whether you had any problems or not?"

## ZORAMTHANGI

“None.”

“Did anyone refuse?”

“No one refused. But Thanmawia there in the corner house told me that he will think about it.”

“Has he paid?”

“No !”

“Okay *Kapu*, thank you ! *Pu* Thanglura will be delighted !”

NEXT MORNING THE DEAD BODY OF THANMAWIA, with multiple stab wounds, was discovered in his house, where he lived alone. There was a hand-written note found nearby. It said : “He said he will think about paying his taxes. He won’t think any more will he?”

The note was unsigned.

THE KILLING OF THANMAWIA WAS REGARDED BY everyone as a severe warning to the non-conformists. Nobody in the village knew the full facts. Only the message found near the body was known to the villagers. Yet, nobody dared discuss the incident openly. It was only in hushed tones and behind closed doors that the villagers discussed the reasons. But one thing was clear to everyone, that taxes must be paid to the underground without any demur.

Saugzuala knew the cause but dared not reveal it to anyone. He was, not without reason, worried also at such extreme action being taken for so minor a lapse.

Zo was flustered at the violence. She had no suspicion of her father involvements inthe incidents leading upto the death of Thanmawia. Robert on the other had remained unaffected. He said that from all accounts he believed that the man had only

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

got his due. From his jumbled logic, Robert gave all kinds of arguments to justify his belief :

"Anyone coming in the way of the nation's fight for freedom deserves the same fate. Anyone who can give any support to *Pu Thanglura* should do so. After all he is not fighting for something personal—he is fighting for our cause while we sit at home and criticise his action."

Sangzuala said severely : "Don't ever mention his name again. Never outside the house. How do you even know that he has anything to do with the death of Thanmawia?"

"Don't worry Daddy ! I am only saying this to you. I am not a fool to mention his name outside the house."

Zo, who was listening to this conversation, became curious.

She asked : "Has he anything to do with..."

"Oh stop it !" shouted Sangzuala. "I don't want either of you to ever discuss this with anyone, anyone at all. Not even me. Walls have ears. Just forget that this incident ever happened. That is the best !" So saying, he left the house.

But Robert and Zo would not let go.

Zo asked : "Why do you think Daddy is so touchy?"

"No, he is right. Mention of *Pu Thanglura*'s name outside the house may be harmful, even dangerous. But we can discuss amongst ourselves."

"Robert," said Zo, "I am worried for Daddy ! Do you think he may be part of all this ?"

"I don't know. But something mysterious did happen that night when we were asked to bolt the door. Normally we don't do that."

## ZORAMTHANGI

“Daddy said he wanted to sit up late !”

“No, when I woke up suddenly, I heard some talking in Daddy’s room.”

“Really ? Did you hear anything ?”

“No. And I did not think it right to try to find out.”

“Was it a male or a female ?”

“Male, of course.”

“And who were the two men who came to Daddy on Saturday when he sent you away to get some cigarettes for them. You mentioned that when you came back they had already gone. I was in the kitchen and I think they hardly stayed for two minutes.”

“You mean Daddy wanted me to be away ?”

“Don’t you think so too ?”

“I wonder if Daddy pays any taxes !”

Just then they heard Sangzuala coming back and they both kept quiet.

ROBERT HAD DEVELOPED A FASCINATION FOR THE grey-and-olive-green uniform of the Assam Rifles. He knew that he will not be able to wear that uniform ever. He wasn’t even sure if, like his father, he wanted to wear it. Although he worked for the unit he loathed the men. They were an arrogant lot and most of them treated the Mizos with scorn. They would talk of the village girls in vulgar terms and though he ignored such talk, Robert felt incensed at their crudeness.

Whenever he was asked to work in the mess, he had his worst moments controlling his temper. Somehow, while eating, the soldiers adopted their most bullying manner. One would

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

shout to him to bring a hot chapati and the other would want a glass of water at exactly the same moment. And if either was delayed, he would be abused in the choicest terms. Similarly, if there was too much salt in any dish or too much chilly or for that matter, too little, he would be abused. In the kitchen he would be abused for anything that went wrong in the entire unit of the Assam Rifles.

But he stuck on. For lately, he had been told to stay on by the man who used to meet him after the Saturday football game.

The man had not told him anything about himself nor had Robert asked. But he could guess that the man had something to do with the underground. Being in the mess and being freely allowed to mix with the soldiers, Robert was able to collect useful tit-bits of information. He had become a slick talker. Whenever he got chatting with any of the men, he would always extract some information and then pass it on to his contact after the football game. Recently, the man had been persuading Robert to join his organisation but Robert had decided to wait for a suitable day.

And the day arrived in the most unexpected manner.

That day he was again assigned to the Solidiers' Mess. Ram Bahadur, a sepoy, was eating with two of his friends—Thapa and Dharam Singh. He shouted to Robert :

“Oey you ! Bring some more meat curry !”

Robert brought them what was given to him by the cook. Ram Bahadur was not satisfied :

“You have brought so little...as if your sister had cooked it and you had paid for it...Who will eat it ?”

“I brought what the cook gave me. If you want more, tell him.”

## ZORAMTHANGI

Ram Bahadur and his friends had had a peg or two too many. Thapa was enraged at the temerity of this boy in answering back to his friend.

"O' boy ! You should learn some manners. And you bloody well go and get some more curry. Otherwise I'll teach you your first lesson right here."

Robert's patience was at an end. Yet he controlled himself and went away quietly. When he came back after a few minutes Ram Bahadur and his friends were really angry and all abused him for being careless and deaf and not heeding to what he was told.

Ram Bahadur continued his abrasive remarks : "Now, son of a bastard, you listen good this time. When we have finished our food...that will be another ten minutes from now, you go and call your sister. She is a good dish and you won't have to ask the cook either. We will persuade her to teach you some good manners also."

Robert had waited long enough. He rasped : "What have you got to do with my sister ? Keep her out of it. If you mention her even one more time, I'll kill you."

What happened after that is not very clear. Ram Bahadur was beyond himself with rage by now and got up and tried to strike Robert. Robert from his height just caught hold of the offending hand of Ram Bahadur and said menacingly : "If you raise your hand again on me, it won't come down in one piece."

Ram Bahadur collapsed in his chair while his two other colleagues stared wide-eyed and shocked. But they recovered soon.

An hour later when Robert stepped out of the unit, Ram Bahadur and his two friends were waiting for him. All three of them set upon the hapless boy. Robert had no chance. Although

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

he fought back viciously, being pitted against the three men, now comparatively sober, proved too much for him. They systematically beat him up until he was unconscious. Shouting abuses and obscenities, they then left him sprawled on the roadside.

HOURS LATER, ROBERT MANZUALA WOKE UP WITH all his body aching. He could not move his hand and his legs were stiff. Not being able to recall immediately how he came to this state, he got up with difficulty. His head was splitting with pain and there was a shrill babel of noise in his ears. In a daze he walked towards his home. As Robert entered the house, Sangzuala mumbled drowsily; "Is it you, Robert ?" and then hearing a "Yes" from Robert, went back to sleep. Sangzuala and Zo had become quite accustomed to Robert coming in at late hours from his work.

Robert went to his room and put on the light. He walked towards the mirror and looked at himself. He was shocked to see his bloated face and his hair caked with blood. He thought his nose was twisted grotesquely to one side. His eyes were barely open, swollen in their sockets. Suddenly he felt his legs give way as his mind raced to what had happened in the mess and the incident after that. He lay there—in a trance—for maybe one hour, maybe more. Tears of humiliation and anger welled up in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. The unfairness of it all—three men against him—otherwise he would have taught the bastards, the *Vais*, a few hard lessons. And how they abused him, his sister, his father, everyone. How would he face anyone at all? He must avenge himself—but how? Alone, it was out of question. And no one would support him against the soldiers—at least not openly. Tomorrow everybody would commiserate with him but no one would do anything about it. He must find the way himself. He started getting irritated at his impatience.

## ZORAMTHANGI

Was he going to take this beating, this insult, lying down? He remembered that in the mess he had threatened to kill them. He could not allow it be an empty threat. He was sure there was a way. He thought of picking up his father's gun and shooting the three *Vai* pigs the very first thing in the morning. But he gave up the idea immediately. It would mean his being killed also—and killed quite foolishly.

Then a thought struck him and he got up with a jerk. He again looked at himself in the mirror. By now the blood all over his face had become dry and a black and hideous, distorted face stared back at him. But time will soon come when the sons of the bitches would rue the day they did this to him. He coolly picked up the towel and went into the bathroom. He bolted the door carefully. He was at peace with himself now. He had by now a very clear mind about his goal and his path. He scrubbed himself carefully and had a long bath, careful not to make too much noise. When he came out, he put on a clean shirt and his last pair of trousers, then put on his socks but not his shoes. He packed his small bag with an extra pair of clothing. He was feeling sad at leaving his house like this but he had no other way, he decision had been made. He could not live with himself as long as he had not wiped out the stigma of having been disgraced by the *Vais*. His father would be crestfallen on finding him gone and Zo would certainly miss him a lot. But he knew they would survive. He dismissed these thoughts from his mind as this was no time for him to waver.

Before coming out of the house, he peeped into his sister's room—she was sleeping soundly. Then he stepped into his father's room. Sangzuala would miss the gun but what else could he do?

Outside the house he sat down for a moment, put on his shoes, uttered a prayer and resolutely started walking towards the forest. He must hurry. He would not like his father to come on his trail. He must be far, far away before dawn.

# 9

AJAI PASSED HIS B.A. WITH A FIRST DIVISION. HE immediately started applying for jobs wherever he thought a man of his qualifications would do. He was twenty-two years old and thought that it was time he stood on his own feet. Father Jacob offered to get him admitted to the University for his post-graduation and told him not to worry about the financial aspect. Ajai was, however, determined. But all that he received in reply to his applications were a few acknowledgements and nothing more.

When he received the interview call for the post of a Dy. Superintendent of Police in Mizoram, he did not even know where Mizoram was. This was the first interview he was to attend and he wanted to do well. He decided to find out all about Mizoram before going for the interview.

## ZORAMTHANGI

The more he tried, the harder he found to procure any material about Mizoram—books, pamphlets, brochures, nothing was available anywhere. Many of the shopkeepers did not even know where or what Mizoram was. The only information he could get was from the Railway office where he was told that from Delhi there was a 48-hour train journey upto Silchar in Assam and thereafter a ten-hour road journey to Aijal, the capital of Mizoram. Nobody could tell him anything more. When he returned to Nirmala that day, Father Jacob asked him : “Any success, son?”

“No Father. Except for the journey time, nothing.”

“Well, I checked up that Mizoram till recently was known as Lushai Hills District. It recently became a Union Territory. Here is the newspaper cutting. It will give you some information.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“And I think you shouldn’t worry too much. Go to Delhi a couple of days earlier to your interview. You will get all the information you want there.”

So Ajai went to Delhi and directly to Connaught Place. There he went to a couple of bookshops. They did not have any literature on Mizoram. In the third shop, he asked :

“Can you give me any book about Mizoram ?”

“Mizoram ? Yes. Surely.”

After waiting for an agonising half hour, Ajai went after the salesmen and asked him :

“Have you found anything ?”

“No, but here is a book on Nagaland. Maybe this will help.”

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"No, this will not help," said Ajai and walked out.

Resigned to his luck, he appeared for the interview. After the medical check-up, etc., he was told that he was selected for the job, provided he could join the six-month training at Phillaur within a week and then be prepared to go to Aijal immediately afterwards. Ajai was delighted.

When he conveyed the news to Father Jacob, his response was restrained.

"My son ! I am happy for you."

In a sudden gesture, Ajai bent down and touched his feet. Embarrassed, Father Jacob held him by the shoulders and looked into his face. Ajai was surprised and somewhat puzzled to see the lack of any thrill on the face of Father Jacob.

"You don't seem to be very happy, Father," he said.

"I am happy, I am very happy," Father Jacob mumbled. "But the place is so far away. And one hears all kinds of stories about disturbances and violent incidents. To tell you the truth, I was hoping that you will not be selected."

"Father, things can't be that bad. And, after all, I will be going as a Police Officer. No problems of security, you see," and he laughed loudly.

Looking at the transparent joy which Ajai felt at his achievement, Father Jacob kept quiet.

AJAI COMPLETED HIS SIX MONTH'S TRAINING IN Phillaur. He continued to come and see Father Jacob whenever he could find an opportunity. After training he was asked to report to Aijal.

## ZORAMTHANGI

Aijal to him was, from the start, like a fascinating book. Put up in a room in the police barracks on his arrival, Ajai found the town an amalgam of extremes. Dirty, narrow roads lined by small, thatch-roof houses, and then suddenly a large two-storeyed mansion, with a tiled roof and painted exterior—or men and women in old bedraggled clothes and suddenly a stunning girl dressed in trousers and long coat, hair cut short and flying loosely in the cold December breeze—such were the sights that he came across. But he could sense an underlying current of hostility towards him. The men looked at him with a suspicious eye and the girls just ignored him. He thought it must be the way a distant, far off city responded to a stranger.

He was posted at Aijal Police Headquarters and was attached to the Superintendent of Police (CID). As he started going through his papers and the cases assigned to him, he found that behind the facade of a peaceful and tranquil land lay a seething volcano. The underground, the hostiles, the hidden enemy always kept cropping up and his presence could be felt at almost every stage of his work. Ajai found that most of his investigations led him to the underground or had something to do with the hostiles. There were no simple crimes and no criminals to be ordinarily encountered with. He was thoroughly impressed by the intricate pattern of the underground organisation that emerged. His inquiries in individual cases repeatedly led him to the brink of an extremely well-organised body, efficient and ruthless in its operations and against which it was very difficult to collect any evidence. He found a strange air of mystery and awe surrounding this organisation. Somehow people would just not talk about it. The police had, however, been able to put together a fairly well framed picture. And the picture had amazed Ajai Kapoor.

# 10

RAM BAHADUR, THAPA AND DHARAM SINGH WERE together on patrol duty on the village boundary. The sun was setting and a mild breeze had started blowing. It was a cold December evening and the villagers were just settling down after dinner. A small fire had been lit near the school and men had started to gather there for their usual gossip session. It was an hour to which men usually looked forward to exchange the latest tit-bits they had collected. It was a motley group. Old men huddled under their blankets, trying to be as near the fire as possible, smoking in numerous ways, each one so typical of the individual smoker.

As the three patrolmen approached the forest near the pathway which connected Lungdai to the main road, they heard some noise. They searched for the source but found the pathway deserted. There they heard a scream. Thapa with his gun

at the ready rushed towards the place from where the noise had come while Ram Bahadur and Dharam Singh provided cover to him. They had not gone far when all of a sudden, and as if from all sides, half a dozen men jumped on them from behind the thick foliage and in a swift action seized their weapons even before they realised what was happening. At the same instant another man appeared, armed with a rifle. He ordered them to proceed towards the jungle. When the party stopped, there was an eerie silence and it was completely dark.

The men near the school were busy, unaware of what was happening in the wilderness of the forest.

The there Assam Rifles men were just wondering as to what was in store for them when a voice rang out breaking the silence. It was one of the men who had brought them who spoke.

"Manzuala, here are your persecutors. Let us see what you intend to do with them."

At the mention of the name "Manzuala", the three patrol-men trembled with fear.

Manzuala replied in the dark. "*Kalawme, Pu Thanga.* I will like them to be tied to a tree, separately. Only one knot at the middle. *The knot* being at the other end of the tree so that their hands cannot reach it. I want all of you to be free to watch the fun."

"Do as he says," said Lalthanga, for it was he who was in command of the party.

Ram Bahadur, Dharam Singh and Thapa were each tied to a thick tree, one string of the rope going round their midriff and tied neatly at the back of the tree. They struggled briefly but futilely, helplessly.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Then Manzuala shouted: "All of you, stand here behind me."

The three men tied to the trees were left alone. They struggled again in the darkness to reach the knot or to slip away the rope but the trees were too wide. Suddenly a powerful torch flashed across the faces of the three men. They could see that it was Manzuala wielding the torch with one hand while holding the rifle in the other. And all the underground men could see the faces of the three men, bleached white with fear. They had now stopped struggling.

The men near the fire continued to gossip and chatter. Some fresh wooden logs had been added to the fire to keep it going.

The darkness was broken again by the flash of the torch and this time a shot rang out from the rifle of Manzuala. The rope around Ram Bahadur's waist fell away cut in the middle by Manzuala's shot. The torchlight went out.

"Run, you bastard. I am giving you 15 seconds," shouted Manzuala.

Ram Bahadur ran frantically but made so much noise that when the torchlight came and the second shot rang out, it caught him right in the middle of his head. He tumbled down, dead.

The torchlight then shifted to Dharam Singh, and it was switched off.

Dharam Singh was in a panic.

"Manzuala," he screamed, "you have known us for long. Please have pity on us."

There was no reply. But the torch flashed again, a shot rang out, there was the same warning and the second shot

## ZORAMTHANGI

caught Dharam Singh bang in the head, as he was still in the process of starting his panic-stricken, noisy flight.

"Nice shooting!" commented Lalthanga.

Thapa did not run when his turn came. Terror had rendered him immobile. When Manzuala flashed the torch a second time, Thapa was still rooted to the ground where he stood.

"Run, you son of a bitch," shouted Manzuala, the torch in his left hand still covering Thapa in a bright ray of light.

"Give him some more time," teased Lalthanga.

"Okay, thirty seconds," said Manzuala, switching off the torch.

Thapa was shot without any chase being required.

In the dark only, Lalthanga shook hands with Manzuala and everyone congratulated him.

"You have done well, Manzuala. Very good shooting and and you have avenged yourself. You can be proud of yourself. And *Pu* Thanglura will be very happy."

Near the school, the fire kept going on just like the chatter around it. One or two men slipped away, obviously having had enough of gossip for a day. Amongst them was Sangzuala, who got up quietly and went towards his house, unaware of the task his son had just completed inside the jungle.

Meanwhile the men inside the forest took possession of the guns belonging to the three dead patrolmen. Manzuala with another disappeared, and after ten minutes another two men vanished into the forest.

Finally Lalthanga and one other named Kapliana were left. Instead of proceeding towards the forest, as the others had done, they started walking towards the village.

Kaplana asked : "Why are we going to the village now ?"

"Because this village will become too hot for us once today's happenings get to be known. So, for the present, we will pay one last visit to our tax collector here."

After that they marched in silence. At Sangzuala's house, it was Zoramthangi, his daughter, who opened the door. On seeing her framed there in the door, Lalthanga was struck dumb for a moment. The beauty of the girl was unnerving, even to him. How was it that he had never seen her before ?

"Is *Pu* Sangzuala at home ?" asked Kaplana.

"He is here. But who are you ?" Zo was worried. At this time could these visitors have brought some bad news about Robert ? Did they have something to do with the underground ?

"We are, we assure you, his friends," said Lalthanga, unable to take his eyes off Zo. Zo asked them to come in.

Sangzuala was sitting up in his bed. His son's sudden departure from his house even without telling him had shaken him considerably. He had suddenly aged a few years. Within two days of his son's departure he had come to know of the whole incident. He did not blame his son for having done what he did. What hurt him was Robert's lack of trust in him. When the two men entered his room, he looked up at them and asked :

"Who are you ?"

Kaplana looked questioningly at Zo and Lalthanga glared at him. But Zo quietly closed the door.

"We are friends of your son. But just now we have been sent by *Pu* Thanglura. You remember I came with him a couple of years back ?"

"Oh yes, you are Lalthanga."

"Yes. We have been sent to collect the funds from you."

## ZORAMTHANGI

"Why so early this time ? I have hardly collected anything so far."

"I'll take whatever you have."

Sangzuala got up, opened his tin box in the corner of the room and took out an envelope.

"Only one twenty-five rupees," he said.

"That's Okay. Thanks."

"Will you have a cup of tea ?"

Lalthanga saw his chance of getting Zo back in the room.

"Yes. Thank you again," he said.

While the tea was being brought Sangzuala and Lalthanga smoked their cigarettes, while Kapliana fidgeted. Sitting there and smoking cigarettes and drinking tea, while three dead bodies lay not two thousand yards from them. There would be hell to pay if they were discovered.

"Shouldn't we be going, Thanga ?" he asked rather diffidently. After all Lalthanga outranked him.

"No hurry. Let's have the tea. We'll need it," replied Lalthanga, not unmindful of the risk in their staying there but prepared to take it nevertheless.

Zo entered with the tea. After giving the tumblers to the three men, she sat down on her father's bed and asked : "What news of Robert ? How is he ?"

Lalthanga saw his chance and seized it. He told them briefly of the whole incident, starting from the day Robert was beaten up. And how he had levelled the score tonight. He knew that telling the secret to these two would do no harm. He told the story in a cold, dispassionate, manner as if he were talking of

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

someone from another world. But, all the time, he was highly excited. Even he was surprised at the sudden thrill that had coursed through his veins on seeing this lovely girl. He had known many girls and was in fact quite a hit with the fair sex. Yet no girl had done this to him. He felt a strange nervousness but controlled himself. Then a fearful thought came into his mind. He may never see her again ! But he decided he will !

Sangzuala heard the story and as he heard it, he became more and more angry, more and more shocked. His son was irresponsible, impetuous, short tempered. But a murderer, a cold blooded killer !? No, that was not possible! The more he thought about it, the more he heard Lalthanga tell about the incident, the more he was convinced that Lalthanga was the brain behind the entire episode. Seething with anger, he told Lalthanga :

“This is a most foolish thing to do. Robert will now, at the age of twenty, be a marked man. The whole Army and police will be after him. He will be hunted day in and day out and sooner than later he will be killed like a rabid dog. And what have you achieved in return for this ?”

Lalthanga was amazed at the senseless chattering of the old man. Did he not realise that his son had achieved a distinction, rare even in this land of head hunters ? That he had become a hero in the underground organisation ? With a son able to kill three of his enemies in such an inimitable style, should make any father proud. But this man was different. Perhaps he was developing some treacherous tendencies.

Sangzuala continued to rant.

“What have you achieved, eh, youngman? Shall I tell you what ? You have turned Robert into a hunted killer and you will soon have the Army and the police crawling over all of us. You have put everyone into trouble, that’s what you have achieved.”

## ZORAMTHANGI

Lalthanga was now seriously considering the possibility of this man betraying him. What should he do? But Sangzuala was an old friend of Thanglura and may not go to that extent. Yet, if he tried he would have to be silenced. But if he did anything of the sort, he would lose this pretty girl for good. And this he had no intention of doing.

Sangzuala spoke on : "Your men have committed a blunder. Robert perhaps did not even know what he was letting himself in for. He is after all a boy. But to kill three men for personal vendetta is totally unjustified. On top of that to ask an innocent boy to do it? This is dishonest and misleading the boy. You people have pushed him in the wide open mouth of a tiger and it is only a question of time before his neck is snapped."

Lalthanga was known for his cool mind. But now he was foaming with rage. He thought he had kept quiet long enough out of respect for a friend of *Pu Lura*. Now this man could not be allowed to go on !

"*Pu Zuala*," Lalthanga's voice was curt, "you know that Robert Manzuala is no more a boy. He is big enough to know what he is doing. I killed my first man three years ago when I was also twenty."

Sangzuala almost screamed; "So? You're all killers. And now you have made my son one of you. He is in your clutches. He can't get out. You all seem to be bent on killing people and burning their houses and destroying their families. Your leader looks to have lost his way. I'll have nothing to do with you all now. Tell *Pu Lura* that he should make some other arrangements for this village. This is the end. I won't collect any funds for you from now on. I'll be the last person to associate with murderers and killers. You can leave now."

Lalthanga realised that it was pointless to argue. He must leave before he lost his temper and did something indiscreet. The

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

old man would get his desserts soon enough. He looked at the beautiful girl, standing now in the corner and cursed Sangzuala. But for this cantankerous old man, he could have become friendly with her. But obviously she would have to wait for a better opportunity. He gave her one passing look, got up and left with his colleague.

### THE WIRELESS CRACKLED...

“I’m Tiger One. I want to speak to King. Urgent.”

It was Lalhanga in a village, twelve miles from Lungdai, but only because of the intricate network of footpaths through the forest had he been able cover this distance in an hour. The wireless set installed in the house of a school teacher was known only to the underground.

“King here. What’s it ?”

“*Kapu*, our man in Lungdai has turned traitor. He has severed all conections with us. What shall I do ?”

“Tiger One ! How did it happen ?” The voice on the other side, that of Thanglura, sounded harsh and irritated.

“*Kapu*, after ‘Operation Hunt’ we went to him. He wanted details about his Puppy. Then he burst out and called us murderers and killers.”

“Why did you enter into any argument with him ?”

“I only told him the bare facts. But involvement of Puppy angered him.”

“Do you think he will go to the enemy ?”

“He might. But he said he will not collect any ‘books’ for us and that I should tell you to appoint someone else to do the dirty job.”

## ZORAMTHANGI

“Did he say that ?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Okay, give the earphone to Contact.”

After a few moments, the owner of the house, the teacher came in.

“Yes Sir ?” he said into the mike.

“The man in Lungdai...His house should be burnt, razed to the ground tonight. But no harm should come to him or his daughter. Tiger One will return to HO at once.” The wireless went dead.

Within half an hour, a band of four was dispatched to Lungdai and the house of Sangzuala was burnt to ashes. Sangzuala and Zoramthangi escaped unhurt but almost all their belongings were destroyed.

EARLIER, THE SAME NIGHT, WHEN THE THREE MEN did not report back from their patrol duty, an extensive search was launched for them. Their dead bodies were recovered only the next morning. The killings and the burning of the house of Sangzuala, all in the same night, created a wave of shock in the village. While no one was in a position to connect the two incidents everyone had heard vague reports of Robert Manzuala's fight with the three men, and of his having joined the underground. Most of them also knew that Sangzuala was collecting taxes for the underground. The underground was, therefore, the common factor. It was already an object of terror in the village. Now with these two incidents, happening one after the other, made the people frightened. The word floated, as if from nowhere, that retribution for flouting the command of the underground was going to be quick and drastic, that cooperating with the

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

police or giving them any information would be fatal for the person, that Sangzuala had been spared his life because of his past services and, that the consequences would have been quite different if any other person had been involved. Men talked in hushed, terrified tones behind closed doors and not even a word was whispered outside.

In the evening-meetings near the school, the weather was discussed and the only other topic touched upon was the forthcoming *jhumming* operation.

**THE AUTHORITIES CAME DOWN WITH A HEAVY HAND** on the village. Curfew was enforced day and night which meant that no one could come out of his home. Only after two days it was relaxed to permit the residents to go out for two hours everyday. All the men and women were interrogated relentlessly for hours on end to find out the perpetrators of the crime. The villagers were, however, too terrified to speak or too clever to let anything out. It appeared as if they had all entered into a conspiracy of silence and except for insignificant tit-bits, the authorities came to know nothing. Little progress could, therefore, be made. The only thing that was established was a connection between the killing and the burning of the house later in the night.

Sangzuala was arrested and interrogated but he also gave out nothing. He knew that by speaking out he may escape from the police but would never escape from the underground. He knew of many cases where somebody had squealed against the organisation but had not lived long after. He was not prepared to take a chance—anyway, not yet. He wondered how at all he got into it. And how was he going to get out of it? He knew that the latter course would be well nigh impossible but he may just manage. But the time for trying had not arrived yet. He

## ZORAMTHANGI

told his interrogators that his son had disappeared from the house some six months back after a quarrel in the Assam Rifles mess and he had no news from him. On the day of the incident he was awakened in the middle of the night by the crackling noise and saw that his house was on fire. No, he did not suspect anyone. No, he did not see anyone leaving the scene when he came out. No, none visited him and threatened him earlier in the evening nor had he received any threats at any previous time. No, no— how could he know of the murder of the three sepoy's earlier ? Yes, he was collecting funds for the underground. Every month a different person came to collect it from him. No, he did not know them previously. Yes, he could perhaps recognise them. His answers were like this, not giving much, not involving him too deeply.

He worried what attitude Zo would take when questioned by the police. Will she back up his story ? Or will she spill out all she knew : and she knew quite a lot. He wished he could talk to her just once before they questioned her.

Zo had meanwhile learnt quite a lot about the incidents of that night through the village grapevine. She was the only person in the village, except Sangzuala, who could fully reconstruct the events of that night and who personally knew the main *dramatis personae*. Could she tell the police ? To do so would amount to virtually putting her father in the can for good. How much could her father have told ? She also knew that the end-result of speaking out would be far more dangerous than of keeping quiet. Her father knew it too. And he was not a fool. She decided that he could not speak out and for his good it was necessary that she should keep quiet.

But her sense of hurt at the moment was acute. She had loved her brother in a quiet, undemonstrative manner and she had believed that he loved her much more than he would ever

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

admit or say. She was proud of the way he had fought for her, With wounded pride, she recalled that he had walked out of the house without even telling her. When she heard of the activities of the underground which her brother had joined she was genuinely worried about him. On that fateful evening she came to know of his direct hand in the murder of the three sepoys, she was dismayed. The burning of her house had left her totally confused. For the second time in a few years she was rendered homeless and she was very angry at the manner in which she and her father had been treated. Her anger was not unreasonably directed against Robert who was partly responsible for the latest of the acts of utter injustice against her father. To help make his own father homeless ! What ingratitude ! Her father's arrest and detention made her mad with helpless fury. She felt like telling the whole story to the police and getting her father's innocence established. But she soon realised that this would be a foolhardy thing to do. Apart from landing her brother into trouble, there was no certainty that her father would be let off. They might try to involve him more deeply as the chance of their flushing Robert out were, for the present anyway, remote.

FINDING THAT NO HEADWAY WAS BEING MADE IN the investigation of the case, the government decided to send an officer from Aijal to supervise the work. The officer selected was Ajai Kapoor, Deputy Superintendent of Police, Mizoram Criminal Investigation Department.

By now Ajai had achieved for himself the reputation of being a clever investigator. His greatest asset was his monumental patience which helped him break down many a hardened, unrelenting criminal. Fair complexioned, of medium height but of athletic build, Ajai was known to break his criminals through persistent questioning and persuasive approach rather than through the conventional third-degree methods.

## ZORAMTHANGI

He had arrived in Lungdai three days back and by repeated and persistent questioning of the villagers he had been able to reconstruct the actual happenings leading to the murders and the burning. But there were vital gaps in the story. And it was as if the villagers had clammed up. Those who spoke in utmost secrecy made it clear that if cited as witnesses they would resile from their statements. He had, therefore, very little to work on. He knew about the role of Sangzuala and his son but had virtually no evidence against either. As for the son, even his whereabouts were not known.

As a final attempt at getting somewhere in the case, Ajai called Zoramthangi who was now staying with her uncle, Thangliana. Sangzuala had himself given out nothing. But his daughter could lend some corroboration to what he already knew.

For both it was a meeting with surprises. When Zo entered the room, Ajai was seated behind his modest desk. Zo found that instead of the tough-looking villainous man with a big moustache and large teeth, a heartless, brutal police officer as she had imagined him to look like, here was a young, pleasant-looking young officer with a welcoming smile confronting her. And Ajai was himself taken aback. She was probably the most attractive girl he had seen. Her complexion was flawless and her large, black eyes were twinkling and bright. She was tall for a Mizo girl and her long raven hair fell over her shoulders cut evenly at the end. She couldn't be more than seventeen or eighteen but looked totally in command of herself.

Ajai asked Zoramthangi to sit down, which again surprised her. She was quite accustomed to men staring at her but had expected him to be curt, officious and indifferent towards her. The police officer's open smile and his relaxed, easy manner had a calming effect on her and she was immediately at her ease. He shouted for his orderly to come and stand inside the room and

## DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS

translate whatever the girl said. Zo smiled and said : “*Kapu*, I can speak English. You may not need an interpreter.”

“Oh, can you ? That’s very good. Where did you learn English ?”

“In school. Where else !”

Ajai laughed again.

Zo reminded herself that she had come there with a definite purpose. She thought that if she spent some more time in pleasantries, she would go off the tangent and decided to come to the point at once.

“*Kapu*, I am here to ask you why are you detaining my father ?”

“Oh yes, your father ! Well, well...Hasn’t he been doing some of the things which, you and he should know, are against the law ? Collecting taxes from the people in the name of some illegal organisation, associating with and assisting criminals and offenders, harbouring those waging war against the government and withholding information from the police. These are some of the unlawful acts for which your father has been arrested.”

“This is all exaggerated ! He has also refused to collect taxes. That is why he is homeless and left without a paisa. That’s why his own son has deserted him and he may be the target of the same people whom he had been helping.”

“So your house was burnt as a reprisal for your father’s refusal to collect taxes. Then why does he not cooperate with us ? Why does he not give us information about these very people whom you now fear ?”

Zo knew then that her father had not revealed anything except that he was collecting taxes. She heaved a sigh of relief

## ZORAMTHANGI

and looked at Ajai straight in the eye. It seemed that this was a different type of a policeman, devoid of all bluster. She liked his bright black eyes that reflected honesty of purpose. She admired his white even teeth. Above all she felt a peculiar nearness to this man, whom she had met for the first time. But she realised with a shock that this was no time to be carried away by sentimentality. She just could not afford to tell him all she knew. Aloud she said :

"I don't know what he has told you. But I'm certain whatever he knew, he has told you all. He does not feel at all happy about what has been happening and God is witness to the fact that he has suffered enough already. Yet you are torturing him,"

"No, no ! Who told you that ? We are not torturing him. He has not even been touched. And the moment he tells us the truth, he will be allowed to go."

"When ?"

"As soon as we finish the interrogation."

"When will that be ?"

"Look, I cannot fix a time for that but your father himself can. Let me tell you that if your father cooperates with us, he will benefit in many ways. We will catch the guilty men and let him go scot free. He may even win a reward from the government."

"I am sure my father has told you all he knows."

"Zoramthangi, after this meeting I am going to allow you to see him just once. You persuade him to tell us all he knows."

Ajai knew that this was his last gambit. If he failed, he may have to recommend the closure of the case—at least for the present. He decided to make it as attractive as he could.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"After the case has been tried, I will personally ensure that your father comes to no harm. We will whisk him away to another village and get him some land allotted by the government. With the reward money you could both make a new beginning."

Most of what Ajai said passed over the head of Zo, as she was only half listening. But she knew that he was making an offer for Sangzuala to turn approver. This would never be ; the organisation had long arms and will catch up with him sooner or later and no police protection would be able to save him, even if there is any police protection. "My father is an honourable man. He will not say anything that is not within his personal knowledge. I will like to meet him, but if the objective of the meeting is going to be to persuade him to tell lies, I would rather wait for his release."

Ajai knew that there was no further point in talking to this girl. She was not only headstrong but she was sharp, and knew her father well. He decided that he would yet use Sangzuala but in a different way. To Zo, he said : "Well then, there it is. We will see what we can get out of him."

"You are not going to hurt him ?" asked Zo alarmed. Ajai took one last chance : "I cannot say. We have to get the truth out of him."

Zo somehow did not feel the ring of truth in this warning and decided to ignore it. She said : "Oh, if that happens, it is his bad luck but I will never forgive you."

Why had this girl come to this personal level ? It touched him to see her placing this kind of confidence in him. Will he be able to retain it ? They had already tried all methods with Sangzuala but he had proved to be a hard nut and had not cracked. As Zo got up to go, Ajai looked at her and said softly :

## ZORAMTHANGI

"Zoramthangi, let me tell you that you are a very attractive girl."

This direct and open compliment was so different from the crude and suggestive remarks she was accustomed to hearing that she liked it immensely. Zo smiled and saying "Thank you" walked out of the office room. She felt less worried about her father. Police officer Ajai Kapoor's manner of talking had impressed her and she felt a deep confidence that whatever else happened, her father would not be physically harmed.

FOUR DAYS LATER, SANGZUALA WAS RELEASED FROM police custoday. Ajai Kapoor had found in him a potential informant. It was realised that straightaway Sangzuala would be of no utility to the police but once he got over his initial reserve, he may prove of great benefit. Ajai had judged from the manner in which Sangzuala had let out a few remarks criticising the underground's cult of violence, that soon the little spark of sympathy which Sangzuala had for the underground would die out and then the contacts and background of Sangzuala could be tapped by the police. Sangzuala, he concluded, was a discreet man and may not at any stage act openly as an informant but could be a vital acquisition, if nursed properly.

His line of reasoning was accepted by the higher authorities. In any case they felt there was nothing against Sangzuala, except his association with the underground for collection purposes. Such cases in Mizoram could be found by the dozen. They also reasoned that there was no concrete evidence against Manzuala.

# 11

FOR ZORAMTHANGI AND HER FATHER THE DAYS following Sangzuala's release were full of anguish and frustration. They did not know how to put back their life on even rails. They did not know where to go and what to do. Their house was reduced to ashes and their belongings had gone. Sangzuala had lost many a friend in the village as it was now known that he was out of favour with Thanglura. Some even whispered that he had bought his freedom through a promise to turn a spy for the police. This rumour was quickly disproved when the subsequent penury of Sangzuala and his struggle to resettle himself was witnessed by the villagers. He was still indirectly blamed for the humiliation and harassment the villagers had suffered after his arrest by the police. Having no alternative, they decided that Sangzuala should rebuild his house and concentrate on his land which had given them good dividends so far.

## ZORAMTHANGI

Sangzuala and Zo plunged into the house-building activity with great fervour and within a week their thatch-and-timber house was ready again. But somehow the warmth which they had experienced in their previous house was missing. Furnished in a most spartan manner, as Sangzuala did not have any more money left, the house had a strange tension built into it. Sangzuala spent as much time in his field as he could and worked very hard to get a good crop. He totally dissociated himself from the activities of the underground. And the underground, having found other, more pliable men, and not displeased with Sangzuala's tenacity in not betraying any one, did not bother him at all.

Zo had finished her high school and passed the examination with good marks. There was nothing further to do for her in the village school. Apart from managing the house, she read a lot. Her favourite was English literature and she almost literally begged, borrowed and stole the English books from wherever she could. Her process of self-education continued and the more she read, the more voracious her appetite for books became. She had a good memory and a sharp sense of the written word. She read everything—novels, plays, short stories, sports magazines, comics—in a word, everything. She had read the *Bible* and liked it so much that she would go back to it again and again when she had nothing else to read. She shared her father's lonely existence and tried to make it happy by cooking good meals of which he was very fond, by talking to him about his Army days which made him nostalgically happy and by being just with him when he was not busy in his field.

Both father and daughter developed a close relationship and drew nearer. They both understood that they were living in a strange world and that almost everyone was so concerned and lost in his own existence that he had hardly any time for anyone else. Sangzuala lamented that his daughter had never had any real childhood and that he was not able to give her the kind of

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

life that she had a right to expect from him. He held himself responsible for the fact that she had been shouldering the responsibilities for many years now which her mother, had she been alive, would have done.

Zoramthangi had herself developed a liking for solitude. She did not relish mixing with boys and girls of her own age and used to marvel at the hollowness of the teenagers in the village. She never went out for a dance and would not participate in the musical evenings arranged by the youth. She somehow felt that she had grown beyond these things. She never allowed any boy in the village even to kiss her.

Sangzuala noticed this loneliness in his daughter and wanted to do something about it. One day he asked her :

"Zo, I am growing on in years. Soon I will be sixty. And no one knows how many years I have ahead of me. Your mother's death really left me all alone in the world. Robert's leaving us has further broken my back. Without you, perhaps, I would have ended my life long ago. I want to see you happy. That is the only objective in life I have. Now tell me, what do you want to do ? Since I do not see any youngman around you so far, I presume, marriage is still far from your mind. Am I right ?"

"Yes Daddy, you are right. But I want to stay with you, that is all I want."

"How long ? Probably I have been selfish so far and not asked you your heart's desire. But I could not help it. But I will not now deny you your wish. I think, even as your father, I have no right to do that."

"Why do you say so ? It is not as if I am living here under any compulsion ! I am here because I want to be with you."

## ZORAMTHANGI

"Look Zo ! Two, three years hence it may be too late for you. I know that you are fond of studies and that you have done well in school. Now that you have finished your school why don't you go to college in Aijal ? Once you have studied upto a decent level you would be capable of fending for yourself in this wide world. I want you like that so that no harm comes to my darling daughter."

"What's come over you today, Daddy ? I am happy as I am and no harm will come to me with you there."

"I won't be put off any longer. I want you to go to college."

"And what'll you do here alone ?"

"I'll work hard in the field and send money for you."

"You'll work hard at this age ?"

"What alternative is there ? If after doing your college you can get a job and start earning, maybe I can sit back and relax. But just now what else can I do ? And it is not as if work is anything new for me. Without something to do, what is the use of a man ? Will you go to college for my sake ?"

"Okay Daddy. If you say so. But I must come and visit you at least once in two months."

"Agreed !"

ZO LEFT SOON THEREAFTER FOR AIJAL WHERE SHE was to stay in a small girls' hostel. Sangzuala was heart-broken but would not hear of her staying back. She asked him to visit Ajail some time. He said he would.

The change from Lungdai back to Aijal was marked and she found that the atmosphere of the Pachhunga College where she

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

studied was one of carefree abandon. The young boys and girls behaved as if they had no worry. Life for them meant only singing and dancing, playing, flirting and discussing sex. Most of them took little interest in their studies. Zoramthangi found herself a stranger in this environment. She kept aloof and got to be known as the "loner".

Zalawma was a year ahead of her in the college. Tall, and handsome, he was known as the playboy of the college. He had an endearing way with the girls and was always full of fun and humour which they enjoyed. His father was a PWD contractor and was a very rich man. Zalawma had had his earlier education in Shillong but had returned to Aijal as he did not much relish the idea of staying away from a home where he was pampered. All Mizos who went to Shillong had as their objective to complete their studies and take up the many government jobs that went abegging in Aijal. Zalawma had no such ambitions. He knew that one day he will take over from his father and, therefore, was just biding his time. What better way to do this than to spend his time in college and make the acquaintance of the pretty girls there. When he saw Zo, his reaction was typical. He invited her for dinner at his father's palatial house where he had a set of rooms, all to himself. He took her refusal as a challenge and plied her with his company not prepared to take a no for an answer.

That year a dance had been arranged at the Aijal Club on the Christmas eve. Zalawma asked Zo to accompany him there. She finally agreed, a bit out of curiosity and more with a view to once-for-all end the pestering of Zalawma. Zalawma came there that evening in his car and picked her up from the hostel.

The Club was decorated gaily and most of the people present were young. A Mizo group of singers had formed a band and were to provide the music there. Zalawma took Zo straight to the bar and asked her :

## ZORAMTHANGI

"What'll you have ? A gin and lime perhaps ?"

"I don't drink."

"Oh ! I think you do !"

"What ?"

"Yes, everybody drinks. The unlucky ones drink only water and the lucky ones like me have a host of drinks to make their choice from. I am going to have a whisky. Why don't you try something ? The sooner you start, the better."

"No, thank you. I don't wish to try anything."

"May be a soft drink then ?"

"Okay."

While Zo nursed her Coca Cola, Zalawma continued to drink steadily saying "Hello" to a girl here, shouting out an obscenity to a boy there and offering a drink to some of his friends. Zo saw that many of the girls were also smoking, drinking and generally enjoying themselves. She felt a wave of regret. Why could she not do it ? Was she any different from these other girls ? Was she lacking in anything ? She decided "not". She also decided that there was perhaps no harm in trying as Zalawma was saying. She saw Zalawma drinking, maybe his fourth whisky and then asking for another. She looked up at his enquiringly.

"Zo, this would be my last !"

"Aren't you going to ask me again ?"

"For a dance ? The floor is warming up. We better wait for some time ?"

"No, no, I meant...for a drink," said Zo, not the one to give up once she had set her mind on anything.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Oh, sure. That's like a good girl. You are now on the right track. What'll it be?"

"Whatever you say. I know nothing about these things."

"You take a nice chilled beer—it wouldn't be too strong for you."

Then one of their college mates Muanpui joined them along-with her boy friend. She offered a cigarette to Zo which she accepted with alacrity. Muanpui told her the real way of enjoying a cigarette. Once the ash had accumulated at the end, it was to be tipped on the tongue rather than in the ash tray. Zo tried it immediately but the hot ash on her tongue gave her no pleasurable sensation. The cold beer tasted bitter and she did not know how Zalawma could go on drinking. Even though he was drinking whisky, its taste could not be much different from beer. After a while all of them got up and went to the dance floor. The lights were soft but the band was blaring forth at its loudest. Slightly dizzy, Zo started enjoying dancing with Zalawma who, she found, was a good dancer, light on his feet and moving gracefully with the rhythm. She had learnt dancing while at Shillong but was quite out of touch now. Zalawma guided her cleverly and soon she found herself getting into the mood. But after sometime Zalawma began to sway uncontrollably and then excused himself and sat down. Worried, Zo asked :

Are you not well?"

"Whoo sez zat?"

He got up and ambled towards the toilet. When he returned his face was flushed and his speech slurred. He again asked Zo for a dance. Zo feeling concerned, said : "Let's go home. It's quite late."

"Noo, the pardy's has just started. Come on, dahling."

## ZORAMTHANG!

Zo got up and Zalawma followed her. Now instead of dancing, Zalawma started pawing all over her and soon they became a spectacle for the crowd. Feeling angry and humiliated, Zo left the dance floor and sat in a corner. Zalawma came over and sat by her side. She said :

“Let's go home.”

“Are you ready ?” asked Zalawma with a wink.

“Please, let us go.”

“Come on, darling, Let us go.”

With difficulty they reached his car. He had difficulty in getting the car out of the parking lot and then drove not towards her hostel, not towards his house, but towards the Khatla side which, she knew, was a deserted area. He drove at a high speed, and even in his sozzled state Zo could not help admiring his control of the car. Suddenly Zo was frightened. Not showing it, however, she asked him quite sharply :

“Where do you think you're going, Zalawma ?”

“For a quiet face to face with you, darling.”

“Look, don't be stupid. Drop me at my hostel.”

“Otherwise what will you do, my pet ?”

“I will...”

“Zo, don't spoil my evening. I will drop you at your hostel soon enough.”

He stopped the car at a lonely corner, pulled it off the road and grabbing Zo, started pulling at her clothes. At first Zo could not believe that this was happening to her. Then she fought back with all her might. This was apparently no joke going on.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Enraged and baulked of his prey, Zalawma slapped her hard and said menacingly :

“Bitch ! Playing hard to get, are you ? No one plays such games with me, you hear ?” and he slapped her again, harder this time.

Stunned, Zo lay still for a moment and Zalawma stretched towards her and kissed her hard and hungrily on the lips while his hands went roughly towards her breasts. This was the first time a man had kissed her on her lips and what a repulsive feeling she had ! Tearing herself away she screamed. In the struggle neither of them noticed the jeep which drove along and stopped near the car. A voice shouted :

“What the hell is going on here ?”

Zo was relieved to see that it was a police jeep and the man who stepped out was Ajai Kapoor, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, who had come to Lungdai. He also recognised her at once and said : “Zoramthangi, what are you doing here ? And who is this man ?”

Now sobbing, Zo told him her story, while Zalawma sat sulking, fiddling with the car keys. Ajai then told Zalawma to go away and to come back and see him at the Police Station the next morning. He took Zoramthangi to the hostel and dropped her there.

THE NEXT DAY ZO WENT TO THE POLICE STATION and asked to see DSP Kapoor. When she met him, she found him a bit disturbed.

“Mr. Kapoor, I have come to thank you again for your help last night. But for your timely arrival, I do not know what would have happened. I am very very grateful to you,” she said.

## ZORAMTHANGI

"I am happy I was of help. But what were you doing with that boy ? He is not a good boy. And he is a liar. He has stated that you both knew each other for some time, that you were smoking and drinking with him and had gone with him of your own free will. He has also levelled charges against me of enticing you away and of beating him up in the Police Station."

"Then he is telling all lies. I am prepared to give my written statement that the later part is absolutely false although the first part is true. But I didn't know of his intentions when I went with him."

Kapoor rang up the Superintendent of Police and told him that the girl involved in last night's incident was with him. The SP called Zo and asked her to tell him exactly what had happened. She narrated each and every detail and specifically mentioned that Kapoor allowed Zalawma to go home in her presence and asked him to come to the Police Station only the next day.

The charges against Ajai Kapoor were dropped. That evening, he came to Zo's room in the hostel and brought along a cake.

"How happy I am that you have been absolved of the ludicrous charges. If something had happened to you, I would never have forgiven myself."

Ajai said : "Nothing would have happened to me. I feel that truth always triumphs. Anyway, that is past. Let us celebrate. I was so relieved but I did not know where to go to share my joy. Then I thought of you."

"You have no one in Aijal ?"

"No one in Aijal. No one anywhere else. I am all alone in this world."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But there must be some relatives, some friends !"

### *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

“I have, ever since I recall, lived in Nirmala Niketan. I have only Father Jacob who has been a source of love to me, an unending source, who has helped me every time I stumbled.”

“Who is Father Jacob ?”

“He is the head of the Nirmala in Chandigarh where I was brought up, where helpless children go and find love and shelter. He helped me in becoming what I am today, in standing on my own feet. He has been my benefactor all through. He got me my education, he encouraged me to come here when everybody told me that Mizoram was a dangerous place for an outsider.”

“Why is it so ?”

“Oh, the reasons are so many. But this wall will have to be broken. Bridges of understanding will have to be built. How can there be such hatred between people of the same country ?”

“Do you really think, Mr. Kapoor, that this is possible ?”

“My name is Ajai. Call me just that.”

“Okay, Ajai, do you think Indians and Mizos can love each other ?”

“Why not ? We have belonged to the same country for centuries and there may have been sufferings for the Mizos. I am even prepared to concede for argument’s sake that these sufferings have been because of the neglect by the rest of the country. So what ? If every part of the country that undergoes a famine or a flood or an epidemic decides to separate from the rest of the country, where would India be ? It is like a family. But no member of the family would leave it because he has a grouse against another member or against the head of the family.”

“I agree. I am myself surprised to see the depth of the emotions in my people. But I believe that unless everyone of us tries, this relationship will always be under the strain of the

## ZORAMTHANGI

hartered that is generated by misunderstandings, lies and falsehoods."

They went on talking. Zo told him about her father, about her life and about her ambition to become a teacher. Ajai told her about other parts of India, which she had never visited, about the many places which he had seen during his tours. Then he looked at his watch and said : "I didn't realise, Zo, that it was so late. I must thank you for making me feel that I have a place to go to in Aijal. Thank you. *Kalawme !*

DURING THE SUMMER VACATIONS ZO WOULD GO TO Lungdai and spend all her time with her father. Even at sixty, Sangzuala was a sturdy man and after a day's hard labour in the field used to listen fondly to stories about life in Aijal from Zo. She told him about her college, about her experience with Zalawma, about Ajai Kapoor and about her studies. Sangzuala did not approve of her friendship with Kapoor but did not say much because it was the first time she had spoken of a young man with any degree of admiration. He had himself known Kapoor and had admired the pleasant mannered police officer. What alarmed him was the open joy with which Zo spoke of him. He wondered if Zo was in love with the police officer. He would be the last person to allow his daughter to marry a non-Mizo and that too a police officer. He would have to talk to her one of these days.

Lungdai had in the meantime become a centre of underground activity. Surrounded by thick forests and with a river nearby, it provided a ready escape route from any pursuit of the security forces. Zo soon came to know that practically half the houses in the village, including her own, had an active member in the underground.

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\* Thanks in Mizo.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"Tax" collection for the underground was the highest in Lungdai. A number of ambushes were attempted while the movements of the security forces were reported quickly. It was impossible to find out who was passing out the information. Once a rice truck being taken to a village on the Aijal highway was hijacked by armed men of the MNO and brought to Lungdai. The rice was then taken into the forest and passed on to the underground. At another time, a driver of a civilian bus was shot dead when he refused to wait for an injured member of the underground to be taken on board.

Then, on top of all this, came the deportation.

Lungdai had about twenty families of *Cacharis*\*. These consisted of some shopkeepers who brought their wares from Silchar at high cost and risk and sold them in the village ; about ten labourers who did all kinds of labour-oriented jobs from building houses to constructing roads—two of them were married to Mizo girls there were also one doctor in the local dispensary and two teachers in the local school. These families paid "taxes" regularly to the underground and there was no trouble between them and the Mizos.

On that night there was hectic activity in the twenty families. Later in the night, they had been told, that they were to vacate the village before dawn, failing which the stragglers would be shot dead. Four armed Mizo youth, belonging to the underground, went from house to house announcing the decision and hustling the families to pack up their belongings. They were allowed to take only their light luggage. It was announced that as a measure of their generosity a boat would be kept ready at the riverside to take away the *Vais*. The boat was scheduled to leave at exactly 4.00 in the morning.

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\*Cachar is the adjacent district of Mizoram and a number of its residents are settled in Mizoram.

## ZORAMTHANGI

The four men started hurrying them and by 3.30 in the morning all the persons numbering 47 gathered near the boat. It was completely dark. No one was allowed to speak.

The boat was an old, weather-beaten cargo carrier with no cover. There were two boatmen with large wooden oars who were engaged by the underground to row the boat away to Lalaghat, the first riverside town outside Mizoram. The boat could hardly accommodate 20 persons. All the 47 were virtually pushed into the boat and the boatmen told to row away. The four youngmen, their guns in their hands, watched till the boat inched its way towards the middle. Then suddenly everybody in the boat started talking and a babel of noise rose from the 47 frightened occupants of the unstable boat. One of the four youth fired a shot from his gun towards the boat. All became quiet again except the four youth who burst into laughter and then disappeared into the village, which was still dark.

Such other incidents started all over Mizoram and the authorities found it impossible to put an effective control on insurgent activities in the far-flung areas. It was decided to group the small villages and bring them near the main road to improve the communications and to facilitate the maintenance of law and order. This step was also expected to help the police to maintain a closer vigil over the activities of the underground. Several small and scattered villages were grouped together and located at one place. The main objective proposed to be served by this measure was to ensure that the underground did not get away after carrying out their depredations, that their supplies were stopped and "tax" collections checked.

When Zo was visiting her father in the summer of 1972, she saw an atmosphere of hopelessness and despair in Lungdai. It was expected any moment that a decision to shift the village would be announced. A strange helplessness prevailed. For

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

once Zo hoped that Robert and his friends would be able to do something about it. Probably at the last minute, they would come out of their hiding and stop this callous step of the authorities.

But nothing happened !

ON A WARM DAY IN JUNE, A POSSE OF THE CRP (Central Reserve Police) arrived early in the morning followed by the Administrative Officer and the decision to shift the entire population of Lungdai village to a road-side village, called Farlawn, was announced. The whole operation was to be completed within two days. There was a wave of resentment in the village but little choice was left to the villagers as there was no one to oppose the decision.

Once more uprooted from their hearth and home, Sangzuala now sixty-one and Zoramthangi of nineteen years, made their preparations to move to the new locale. It was heart-breaking for them to leave the place where they had lived for more than six years and where they had faced so many vicissitudes of life.

Farlawn was closer to Aijal on the main Lunglei Highway. The 50-kilometre distance could be covered in just about two hours by the bus services that ran between Aijal and Lunglei. The most impressive building in the village was the headquarters of the Army Company, which had a commanding view of the village. There was a school and a dispensary. The population touched the figure of 2,000 with the new influx. The Village Council distributed the *jhum* plots to the newcomers. Sangzuala also got a plot nearby. Except for his meagre pension, this would be the only source of income for him. The school was enlarged and some more teachers were to be appointed. Finding Sangzuala in a very depressed state of mind, Zo decided to stay with him and leave her education at Aijal incomplete, at least for

## ZORAMTHANGI

the time being. It was frustrating but she knew that if she left Sangzuala alone at this time, he would brood and sulk and probably die. Her living in the village would mean a lot to him and help him to adjust himself in the new environs. Her appointment as a teacher in the village school gave her added inspiration to make this sacrifice for her father.

They constructed again their little house and while Sangzuala slogged in the field, she taught at the school. She took on the dual responsibility of the house and her job. With her quiet efficiency she proved a success at both. Teaching came to her naturally with her sober nature and her wide reading.

That day was a particularly happy one for her, for she had received her first salary.

“Daddy, Daddy, I got my pay today. Here it is,” and she gave her pay packet to Sangzuala.

“Two hundred rupees ! See this is your first salary. And even my last was not that much !”

“Daddy, you should now stop working in the field. Isn’t my pay enough to make our two ends meet ?”

“Zo, perhaps it is. But what will I do sitting idle the whole day. All my sixty years I have worked every day. Now suddenly to sit idle...”

“But what is the necessity ? It is not your age now to toil in the field, not caring for the hot summer, pouring rain or chilly winter.”

“No Zo, I will not be able to sit idle. What will people say ? That I am living on my daughter’s earnings. I will never be able to bear that.”

“Why, you get your pension also !”



## ZORAMTHANGI

"And what is your connection with all this ? Do you pay yourself ?"

"Of course, I do. I am also the collector for Farlawn."

"So what do you want from me ?"

"Pay me Zoramthangi's share. She told her friends in the school that she would hand over her pay to you."

"Look, Thanguama. That's not my money. I have no right over it."

"Then go and ask her !"

"Is it right for you fellows to collect money from young girls ? They'll need it after their marriage."

"*Pu* Zuala, I am not to decide what is right and what is wrong I am here only to follow my orders."

"And who gave you the order to collect from Zo ?"

"I have my orders," he persisted without naming anyone.

"Well, Zo will not pay."

"What ?"

"You heard me right. Yes. Zo will not pay. Let me tell you that as long as I am alive, not one paisa will be paid from her salary to your 'organisation'. You people know nothing but violence that causes troubles to the Mizos. What have you achieved so far but for the endless troubles for all of us ? How do these measly contributions help you to fight against a big country ?"

"*Pu* Zuala, you have been with our organisation yourself. Your son is even now with us. You should not take an unreasonable stand like this. My advice to you is to reconsider your stand. I will give you more time. You think coolly before you

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

give an answer like that. You have suffered enough. I will not wish any more harm to come to you."

"Are you threatening me? You will get nowhere. My answer is final."

"I'm sorry about that."

Thanguama left without further argument.

Sangzuala knew that Thanguama would straightaway report his refusal to his superiors. He also knew the consequences. He had not forgotten what happened to Thanmawia in Lungdai when all he had said was that he will think. And could he forget his own past experience? Somehow he did not care. He would not have anything to do with this kind of an exploitation any longer, certainly not of his own daughter. Once in that noose it was hard to get out. The bastards did not leave you and stuck to you like a leech. He must do something quickly. He rolled another cigarette and, to his surprise, noticed that his hands were shaking. Was he frightened? He had never known fear in his life and now this is what old age had done to him. He puffed at his cigarette desperately. And in his desperation committed a fatal blunder!

SANGZUALA THOUGHT THAT HE WOULD BE DAMNED if he just sat there and awaited his death. He determined to do something. And what he decided was to go and report his conversation with Thanguama to the Army authorities. And to ask them for protection. Two soldiers in civilian clothes were posted outside the house of Sangzuala, out of sight, and to report immediately any suspicious movements around the house. Thanguama was arrested and interrogated most relentlessly. He acknowledged being the man who went to Sangzuala's house that evening but denied that he had asked for any money or had issued any threats to Sangzuala. Neither the police nor the

## ZORAMTHANGI

Army were able to get anything more out of him.

Sangzuala was not very happy living under continuous Army protection but then he did not have any alternative. Every month he used to make a trip to Aijal to deposit Zo's pay in the Post Office. When he started getting ready that day, Zo came running into the room and said : "Daddy, don't go to Aijal on your own. I am afraid for you."

"Silly girl ! I am not going alone. I am being taken in a jeep and there will be Armmen going with me. You don't have to worry at all."

"Still I am worried. Can't you send somebody else ?"

"Why should I ? I am fed up of staying cooped up here. You make a nice dinner and wait for me. I will be back before dinner time."

"Take care of yourself."

Sangzuala accompanied by three soldiers left at about 11 A.M. for Aijal. They planned to stay there for about an hour and then turn back and stop in between at another Army camp from where certain material was to be picked up.

On their return trip, they reached the camp and picked up the things and left almost immediately. Within five minutes their jeep was caught under heavy fire from the teak trees high up on the hill-side of the road. One of the bullets pierced the windscreen of the jeep and another burst a front tyre. The men in the jeep returned the fire as the jeep careened to a stop. While they themselves provided an exposed target, the Armmen did not know what they were shooting at. Much later, when a truck passed from the spot, it was discovered that all the five occupants of the jeep were killed while their attackers did not suffer any casualty.

### *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

THE DEATH OF SANGZUALA BROKE THE LAST LINK that Zo had with her past. She knew that for the last one month her father had been extremely unhappy. He had been tortured by his own thoughts. Socially ostracised, he had nothing to do but to sit at home and chat with his guards or when not doing that, to interfere in everything in the house. Not that there was much to interfere with. But he had himself become irritable and with some guilt she realised that she was herself annoyed by his behaviour sometimes. But now that he was gone, she felt a void in herself. He had always been a loving father and had during the last few years cared only for her welfare. And how life had treated him ! Almost everything he wanted had vanished in front of his eyes. She realised with a shock that she was entirely alone in the world. Where was Robert ? He did not even care to come to see his dead father. Did he even know of his death ? Did he even know that they were living in Farlawn and that Lungdai village did not exist any longer ?

Alone, she decided to go back to Aijal and continue her studies there. If she could complete her B.A., from which she was only a year away, she could get a job in one of the schools in Aijal and fend for herself, as her father would have desired her to do.

## 12

IT WAS ONE AND A HALF YEAR LATER, ZO WAS teaching now in the Mary Mount School in Aijal. She had taken a small portion of a house on rent and lived there. It was not very far from the school.

That evening she received a visitor. The visitor was none other than Lalthanga.

“Good evening, Zoramthangi !”

“Good evening. Haven’t I seen you before ?”

“Of course you have. At your house in Lungdai. Let us see...it was about four years back.”

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

“Yes, now I remember !” Immediately her thoughts flew to that evil night when this man had visited them and almost all their miseries had started. Suddenly she became angry : “Why have you come here ?”

“All in due course, young lady. You have grown, haven’t you ?”

“I suppose I have. So what ? You were responsible for the burning of my house and then for my father’s killing. How did you dare to come to my house ?”

“I didn’t know it needed daring to come to your house ?”

“Don’t you people have even the slightest compunction in killing ?” In burning innocent people’s houses?”

“My name is Lalthanga. During my seven years’ association with the movement, no innocent person has been killed. Of course, all those who work against our cause have to go.”

“What had my father done ?”

“Oh that old...! He ..”

Zo almost scremed : “How dare you call him a fool ?”

“Don’t get angry, Zoramthangi. Your father was indeed a fool. He was given a reprieve many times but he would not see the light of the day. What else could we do ?”

“Why have you come here ?”

“Okay, let me tell you. We have disturbing reports about you. We don’t like them. And I have been sent to advise you not to mislead our children.”

“What’re you talking about ? What reports ? What’s misleading ? And whose children ?”

“Listen to me calmly. I am here as a friend. In your school

## ZORAMTHANGI

you are telling the children all kinds of lies about Mizoram and India. Your teaching in school is one big bundle of falsehoods. Your advice to the Mizo children is all wrong. Your sermons of tolerance and brotherhood are negations of our philosophy. We are concerned at the ill effects of your counselling our children in the wrong direction."

"How are you so much concerned about me and my teaching ? Oh, now, it is not you...it is the ominous 'us' again. I am thrilled at being of so much interest to your organisation. What exactly do you want me to do ?" said Zo and sat down, as if she was all ears.

"We want..."

Zo interrupted him : "Why can't you give up this scornful habit of saying 'we' when you are speaking in singular, first person ?"

"You can't forget that you are a teacher, can you ?"

"That's exactly the point. I cannot forget that I am a teacher just as you never seem to forget your cause. How do you expect me to tell my students half lies and distortions ? I teach them History and Geography. Can I alter either of them according to your desire or convenience ?"

"Nobody is asking you to tell lies. Is it a lie that Mizoram is not and never was a part of India ? Is it a lie that the people of Mizoram do not like India's domination ? Is it a lie that the *Vais* are polluting our social and cultural life ? Is it a lie that India with its huge Army has been unable to subjugate the Mizos ? Is it a lie that except for its military might, India would not be allowed to stay in Aijal even for a minute ? A country that is ruling over us with guns, killing our people indiscriminately, you call that country great—this is a lie. A country with

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

a population of 56 crores fighting against three lakh people and that too unsuccessfully—how can it be great ?”

Zo clapped. In the quiet of the room, the sound of her clapping reverberated. Then she laughed and said : “What a speech ! But this is good for the multitudes. No sane person would be impressed because your facts are all wrong. If it was just the military might India wanted to use, Mizoram could be subjugated in no time. And it is not three lakh people against India—it is just a handful like you. India’s greatness is to be judged by the fact that even when she can use her military force she is trying to use persuasion. Your facts are not wrong only upto here. I do not teach these things in my school. I teach them about India’s greatness in history, about our culture and heritage, which in its origin is no different from the culture and heritage of India. I teach them about the brother hood of man. I teach them of the greatness of non-violence and Mahatma Gandhi. I teach them tolerance and of Jesus Christ. What is wrong with all this ?”

Now, it was Lalthanga’s turn to be angry. He was highly infuriated by this girl who refused to see any logic but he kept his voice level :

“Ours is a people’s fight. And no force can crush it. We are bound to win. Anyone who comes in the way will be removed. India with all her police and Army has not been able to destroy our spirit and never will. And you go on telling our children that there is nothing wrong in all this. How do you justify this even to yourself ?”

“My beliefs are my own. Even you will concede me the right to think for myself. I can not, and will not, twist the facts to suit anyone.”

“Your teachings go against the aims of our organisation. It can be dangerous for you.”

## ZORAMTHANGI

“Your organisation is playing with fire. You do not look into the distant future of the people you think you are serving. The future of Mizoram, the future of these children I am teaching, lies with India and not outside. Do you think that a country of your imagination with a population of three lakhs, situated as we are, with our meagre resources can survive in this nuclear age?”

“I like your spirit. But let me tell you that Mizoram with India can at best be an appendage, a satellite, a backward part of a still more backward country. On our own, we can realise our true potential. Our people can breathe free and live free, instead of being suffocated by repression and exploitation.”

“I think you deliberately close your eyes to the truth. India, a backward country ! What greater travesty of truth can there be ? India is a great nation fulfilling its role in history. If there is hope anywhere in the world, for the poor, the down-trodden, it is India. And how do you intend to attain your freedom ? By killing a soldier here, burning a house and firing a shot there ?”

“We'll enlist support from friendly countries.”

“How many foreign friends have you got so far ? And do you think they will come to your help for nothing ? They are bound to demand their own price.”

“We have got many friends. And they will not demand any price. Many more will join and we will intensify the fight. You'll soon hear about it.”

. This time alarmed, Zo asked quickly : “What are you planning to do ?”

“Nothing that I can discuss with you. I think I have already spoken too much. Look Zo, I am your friend I know your brother very well...”

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

At the mention of her brother, Zo suddenly became all curiosity. She had heard nothing from him for many years and although in her heart there was a deep resentment and anger against Robert for the manner in which he had cut himself off from his family, Zo had also a sneaking admiration for him. She again interrupted Lalthanga :

“Where’s he ??”

“While I am not free to tell you his location, let me tell you that he is a close friend and an esteemed and much admired colleague. He is now a Captain in our Army and will go places. He is bright youngman, fearless and daring.”

“Can’t I see him ??”

“Of course, you can. I’ll tell him and he will come and see you one of these days.”

“Thanks.”

“I was saying that apart from being your brother’s friend, I like you very much for your boldness and your frankness. I would not like any harm to come to you. Take my advice. Change your ways !”

“And if I don’t ? What will happen ??”

“You will be putting yourself into difficulties.”

“You know that threats did not work with my father. Nor will they work with me,” and she got up.

“Why don’t you understand ? I am not threatening you. I’m am only trying to help you.”

Zo laughed derisively : “Oh God ! Thanks for your concern. But I do not need your help just now.”

## ZORAMTHANGI

"You are a very stubborn girl ! I'll still like to convince you of the justness of our struggle. I will come and see you again."

As he got up, Zo noticed for the first time that he had a feline grace about his movements. Of medium height, with long hair and quick, watchful eyes, Lalthanga smiled broadly for the first time ever since he had come. She saw that he had even, white teeth and looked much younger, just a boy, when he smiled. And Lalthanga repeated to himself that Zo was even a more desirable woman than he had thought at their first meeting.

WHEN ROBERT CAME TO HER HOUSE, A FEW DAYS later, she had just returned from her school. She was surprised to see how emaciated Robert had grown over the last four years. He was thin and tall even when he had left the house—if anyone could be, but he was thinner now. As she opened the door, he came forward, rather awkwardly she thought, to embrace her. It was then that she realised with a shock that his left arm was missing. She was hardly the one for hysterics and outbursts of emotion. The sight of Robert, tall, lean, almost haggard, his dark brown eyes shining in a pale, hollow face moved her to tears. Within moments she was transported years back when Robert used to be with them. He was then a smart youngman with a future. What was he today ! What had happened to him ?

When he spoke his voice was deep and resonant : "Where are you ? Zo, come back. I am here before you."

"O Robert, where have you been all these years ?"

"I have been around. How are you ? I see that you have become a big woman now."

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"Well. Robert I managed to survive. If only you knew what Daddy and myself went through."

Suddenly finding her own brother before her, it was as if the dam which she had built for herself gave way. For the first time in her life, since she could remember, she burst out sobbing and clung to Robert like a little girl. It was several minutes before either of them spoke. They went over the intervening time and told each other of their experiences. Zo told all and Robert most of the things they had been through. When Zo asked him about his arm, he only told her that it was an accident. After staying with Zo for that evening he left soon afterwards, promising to return and extracting a promise from her that she will keep his visit a complete secret.

But it was not a complete secret any way. DSP Ajai Kapoor came to know of the visit as soon as Robert left Zo's house. One of his informers saw Robert leaving the house and recognised him. Search parties were sent around but Robert had vanished. Kapoor decided to talk to Zo next morning.

And Kapoor also knew how Robert had lost his arm.

**ROBERT MANZUALA WAS DISPATCHED EARLY LAST** year to the southern town of Saiha for carrying out a mission of revenge. Two members of the underground had been arrested by the police collecting forcibly donations from some people. It had been established that Rensiama, the town Police Inspector, had investigated the case inspite of warnings from the underground and had arrested the two men, again despite the warnings from some quarters. It was rumoured that while in the police custody the two had been tortured with a view to extract a confession involving some of the local financiers of the underground. The underground then decided that Rensiama was proving to be dangerous and should be liquidated. It was

## ZORAMTHANGI

also meant to be a warning to the other Mizos in the police not to become too enthusiastic about their jobs. Robert Manzuala was entrusted with the task of meting out the exemplary punishment.

Manzuala had reached Saiha, and demanded and got four trusted men from the local underground town commander. He then watched closely the movements of the Inspector. That evening Rensiama was to return to his house at about 9 00. The party lay in wait for him near his house. When Rensiama came he was not alone but was accompanied by two constables, both armed. Robert waited for the two constables to leave so that they could storm the house and kill Rensiama. After about an hour all three of them came out of the house. Manzuala decided that the odds were in his favour and made up his mind to take on the three policemen. In the following shoot-out, the Inspector was killed but the two constables escaped. Manzuala himself was shot in his left shoulder and one of his colleagues after being hit in the leg was arrested. The two others escaped. Massive searches were launched for the injured assailants, whose names had been revealed by the arrested man. Due to this probably, Manzuala got no chance to go to a hospital. Normally a doctor would perhaps have been kidnapped but because of the extensive police presence this would have immediately revealed the whereabouts of the injured assassins. Several critical days passed before a doctor from the neighbouring town of Lawngtlai could be brought over. By then gangrene had already set in and Manzuala's left arm was amputated.

Manzuala, Kapoor recalled from his records, had started his career in the underground with the murder of the three Assam Rifles men in Lungdai and had not looked back since. He was now involved in more than a dozen murders and many other serious crimes. It was generally expected that after dismemberment, he would retire to some quiet job in the underground

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

set-up as he was badly wanted by the police and would not dare to come out. At the same time, he was too valuable to the organisation to be just packed off by them. But Manzuala had belied these expectations. It was now known through police informers that Manzuala was an expert shot and single-handed was probably the fastest draw. He was still a very dangerous man. And still much wanted by the police.

Kapoor decided to explore the possibilities of finding something more about Manzuala from Zo. He went to her the next morning.

He briefly told her about the criminal deeds of Manzuala. She was amazed at how changed a man her brother was. He had himself told her some of his exploits but she had not realised the gravity and the extent of his crimes. She also felt a genuine concern for Robert now.

"You see, Ajai, you can't put too much of blame on Robert. After all he was a kid when those three men beat him up. What could he do ?"

"Don't tell me you are serious in espousing his cause ! He could have reported the case to the police."

"What could the police or the Army do for my father ? But don't get me wrong. I am against all violence. But what I'm driving at is that every man must find his own way. And Robert found his own—though to you and me it may appear to be the wrong one."

"For argument's sake even if I concede that he had some justification for the initial killings, it did not give him the license for going on and on."

"I agree with you. What're you going to do with him ?"

## ZORAMTHANGI

"Once I catch him, I'll put him before the Court. Then the law will take its own course."

"Can't you do something for him?"

"I don't think anyone can do anything for him. He has reached a stage..."

"I think he is not well. He looked quite sick when I saw him last."

"Probably that's what is making him more desperate."

"I would like to believe that he could come back to society. He is a very intelligent man. He could be an asset."

"Well, I don't know. Did he tell you anything about his future plans?"

"No."

"They are on to something big. Manzuala is here. And another equally dangerous colleague of his is here. We will, I am sure, find out soon."

Zo in her long and close association with Ajai Kapoor had learnt that it was better for her not to ask him too many questions regarding his work. Generally, he was very careful. Even when he mentioned something inadvertently, she did not pursue the topic. Today also she did not ask who that dangerous colleague was, nor did Kapoor tell her.

Kapoor was, in fact, worried about Lalthanga's activities. Whenever he was in Aijal, there was a wave of violent activities. This time it was all too quiet. And this worried Kapoor still more.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Lalthanga was in the meantime summoned to the underground headquarters, which fact was not in the knowledge of Kapoor. With him, Lalthanga took Robert Manzuala.

When they reached the secret headquarters across the border they were both so tried that they straightaway wanted to go to sleep. Lalthanga was, however, told that Thanglura had already asked about him twice and that he was to go and meet him rightaway. Lalthanga had a quick wash and then went to the house where Thanglura was staying for the present. He was immediately recognised and ushered into the palatial room, where he found Thanglura seated behind a big desk. There were two others in the room both of whom he recognised as Lalbowia, the Police Chief of the rebel set-up, and Dawngliana, their man in charge of Home Affairs. They had already been discussing something when he entered.

Thanglura said : "So you have finally come, Thanga. It took you a long time after you left Aijal."

"Yes, *Kapu*. We had to dodge a police party on our way."

Does anyone know that you are here ? Are you sure no one followed you ?"

"I am sure. We were able to give them the slip within India."

"Good. Now to business. You must be tired. I will not detain you for long as we have already discussed most of the important things with my two colleagues here."

Lalthanga settled down for a long evening. He knew that when Thanglura started off like this he generally meant the other way. Thanglura spoke again :

## ZORAMTHANGI

"What are your reports about Aijal ? I believe you are going soft on that girl."

Lalthanga was not surprised. There was hardly anything that Thanglura did not know. He replied : "No *Kəpu*. She is a difficult one to convince but I am sure she will come round. And when she joins us she will be a positive asset."

"A positive asset, eh ? She is very beautiful. Be careful in how you handle her. And I hope Robert did not become too sentimental with her."

"No. He met her only once. And then we came away here."

"What about the morale of our forces?"

"Kapoor, that is something that bothers me. It is not very good."

"And what about the people ?"

"Same. They feel that we are not doing enough to protect their interest and that the *Vais* continue to dominate the life at Aijal."

"Why do they feel so ?"

"All important posts are held by the *Vais*. They are flourishing in their business, and are taking up all the jobs available."

"What are your reports regarding the new IGP ?"

"He is a dangerous man for us. He is organising his forces well and has been able to win over several of our friends. He is also getting a number of new officers from outside."

"How is our fund collection ?"

## DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS

“Not very satisfactory. Our collections have fallen over the last months. It has also become very difficult to go out for the collections because of the spies.”

“The word about recruitment would be the same, I suppose. Well, I have received similar disappointing news from our other centres. We are sliding. We will have to do something about it. What do you say, *Pu Bowia* ?”

Lalbowia was a soft-spoken man and he spoke with an effort.

He said : “We need to rejuvenate the struggle by some drastic action. Our people perhaps do not know what they are expected to do. Some clear direction from you is required, *Pu Lura*. For one thing we could concentrate on turning out the *Vais* from our land.”

“Well yes. That’s a good idea. And what do you feel *Pu Dawngiana* ?”

Dawngiana had narrow eyes and spoke with authority : “I agree with the view of *Pu Bowia*. In addition to what he has suggested we could intensify our fund collection.”

“Another good suggestion ! Do you have anything to say, *Thanga* ?”

“I strongly feel that we should take some step that would catch the public eye, that would show them that we are alive, that we have not forgotten our way.”

“This is the best of all,” said Thanglura, delighted. I am glad that you have offered such constructive suggestions, gentlemen. I accept that the position is gradually becoming desperate, that we are losing public support and that a sense of hopelessness is coming over our own people. I feel that we have

## ZORAMTHANGI

been on the defensive too long. We must proceed to take some positive action.”

After some more discussion it was decided that a “Quit Mizoram” notice should be issued publicly asking all non-Mizos to quit Mizoram by 31st December failing which the underground would take severe action against them. It was also decided that the organisation cadres should be asked to be more strict in the collections and any persons not complying should be dealt with sternly. Recruitment of men to the underground was also to be speeded up.

Then Thanglura spoke again : “Regarding Thanga’s proposal, I have been thinking hard. What can be done that should be spectacular for us and demoralising for them ? I have not been able to think of any such thing. Can any of you suggest anything ?”

Lalbowia spoke : “I think if we can ambush an Army unit, it would create sufficient sensation.”

Dawngliana : “We should attack the Treasury at Aijal and carry away all the money there. This will help us financially also.”

Lalbowia : “Or we could capture a Police Station ?”

Dawngliana : “Or attack a few senior enemy officials ?”

Then Thanglura spoke up : “All these ideas have merit. I am not sure if they will meet our objective fully. What do you feel Thanga ?”

“I don’t know, I am not so sure,” and Thanga kept quiet after this.

The meeting broke up, undecided. Soon after, Lalthanga brought Manzuala with him and together they went to Thanglura

### *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

and met him in his chamber. There Lalthanga explained his plan to Thanglura. It was instantly approved.

HE TRUSTED HIS SHARP SENSE OF THE IMPENDING danger. Always, his sixth-sense would jingle a bell in his mind. And at the eleventh hour, he would make a subconscious move that resulted in his escape. Many a time he had come out safe from situations which had the portents of becoming dangerous sometimes fatal, for him.

Like on that occasion when he was posted as Superintendent of Police in Sitapur in U.P. The SP's house was a huge, rambling affair. He and his wife were using only three rooms in the whole house. That night he was alone. His wife was visiting relations in Lucknow. At about two in the morning, he suddenly woke up. Although it was early November and quite cool, he found that he was sweating. He was puzzled and knew that something unusual was going to happen. But what? He had long back given up fighting or questioning this warming instinct. Half asleep, he moved to the other bedroom, which had not been used for months. He planked himself on the bed and immediately fell into peaceful slumber. It was almost an hour later that he was rudely awakened by the shattering noise of a hail of bullets. Getting up slowly and walking cautiously in the dark, he went into his own room and waited. He heard footsteps on the gravel outside, running away from the house. After a few minutes, he switched on the lights. A shudder went through his body when he looked at the bed, where he was sleeping earlier. It was riddled with bullets. Somebody had taken a pot shot at him, but he was elsewhere.

This was Lakshmi Kant Chowdhury, Indian Police Service, Inspector General of Police, Mizoram. Aged forty-eight, Chowdhury was specially chosen for the assignment. He was

## ZORAMTHANGI

reputed to have the boldness of approach and the energy to tilt the balance against the lawless elements. During the recent months, the underground had grown bolder and their repeated challenges to the authority had not been met. It was even suspected that many in the top government echelons were hand-in-gloves with the underground hierarchy.

Of medium height and powerfully built, Chowdhury was a powerful man in the government and wielded his power with authority. Blessed with a cool temperament, a sharp intellect, he had steel-grey eyes, thin lips and an aquiline nose, which all combined gave him a cruel appearance. He was anything but cruel though—cold, calculating, ruthless, yes. But not cruel. Typical of the man was his love for pets—a couple of Pekinese dogs, one Labrador and an Alsatian, in addition to two Siamese cats. He would be happiest when amongst his pets.

He loved the challenge that had come his way—of reorganising a depleted police force, of giving powerful support to a demoralised administration and of piercing the armour of a well-knit underground organisation.

THE SPRAWLING PREMISES BORE A GRIM APPEARANCE of neglect and disrepair. A barbed-wire fencing had been hurriedly put up to give some semblance of security to an otherwise vulnerable building. Situated on the slope of an elevation, the building was overlooked by a number of government offices, including the Office of the Deputy Commissioner. A wooden gate which badly needed to be replaced was hardly an obstacle, as it was meant to be, for anyone trying to force his entry in. The building itself was of typical Assam type construction—wooden pillars and supporting structure, asbestos-sheet walls and corrugated-iron sheets to cover the top.

This was the Police Headquarters of Mizoram, popularly known as PHQ. The building from where the security of

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Mizoram was arranged and coordinated was a moot testimony of the irony of the situation.

ON 13TH JANUARY 1975 LAKSHMI KANT CHOWDURY'S warning system failed !

He walked into his office, after lunch shortly after 3.00 P.M. He usually wondered at the futility of the armed guard sitting in his car and the jeep-load of CRP men preceding him every time he stirred out of his office or house. Today also nothing had happened and he soon may find justification for doing away with this piece of pageantry. He heaved a sigh of relief when he looked at his engagement pad. It showed only one entry :

4-00 P.M.—Visit to site for new PHQ.

He was feeling strangely tired. He had missed coming to the office in the morning and had worked at his house. For the last three days he had a slight cold and perhaps a mild fever. This damned climate did no good for his allergy ! He had been unable to get up early enough for his morning constitutional. Instead of spending the one hour over breakfast in the sun as he usually did, he had spent his time in bed. He had felt concerned at the general ennui gradually overcoming him and had determined to fight it back. Then he thought : Give it one more day, just one more. The last. Cancel the damned visit today.

He leaned back in his chair and called his Personal Assistant : "Judy, can you cancel this visit today ? I will go there tomorrow."

"Are you not feeling well, Sir ?"

"Oh, I don't know. I am feeling sort of tired."

"I am sorry to know that ! Yes. I would cancel the visit

## ZORAMTHANGI

today. What time shall I fix it tomorrow ? I will have to inform the Chief Engineer also.”

“He is also coming, is he ?” Then he thought : If I am going to fight it tomorrow, why not start today itself. What the hell ! I must get hold of myself. Aloud he said : “Okay, forget it. I will go. On your way out just send for Dass and Sharma. And ask them to make it quick.”

Dass was Chowdhury’s Deputy and Sharma was the Superintendent in charge of the Criminal Investigation Department and Special Bureau.

“Yes Sir,” said Judy and withdrew.

JUDY WAS RELIEVED. MIGHTY RELIEVED ! FOR EARLY that morning she had received a telephone call. She had come to the office just then and was awaiting a message from Chowdhury. When the telephone rang, she picked it up quickly and listened.

“Hello, Judy ? It’s me. What’s the programme today ?”

She recognised the voice as that of Lalthanga. Immediately on her guard, she spoke into the telephone softly : “Wait a moment.”

She got up, closed the door of her cabin and bolted it from the inside.. Then she spoke again : “He leaves a little before 4.00 for the site at Shivaji Tillah.”

“We’ll take him there only...”

“Where ?” said Judy alarmed. Was there a change of plan ?

“At the office. Detain him there till 4.30 We’ll be there before that.”

“I will try. Best of luck.”

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

There was a click on the other end and the telephone went dead.

So when Chowdhury told her that he would after all go for his rendezvous, she had reason to be relieved. Otherwise the chances were that he would have left the office earlier and she could have done nothing about it. And the planning of days together would have been upset.

JUDY LALMANGHAI WAS AN ATTRACTIVE GIRL. After her normal education in Shillong she had done her stenography and Private Secretary's courses from Calcutta and had even worked for a few months at a firm in Calcutta. Then a stroke of luck brought her to Aijal. Her father died. When she came to Aijal, she met Manzuala and straightaway came under his influence. He introduced her to Lalthanga, who suggested that she take up a job in the PHQ. The right strings were pulled and the job was hers. Like many other girls of her age who came in contact with Lalthanga, she also fell in love with Lalthanga and became his mistress. She had been in the PHQ for the last three years and had been appointed Personal Assistant to Chowdhury when he took over as the Police Chief. Efficient in her work, Judy had organised the office in a manner that nothing important happened there without her knowledge. She was cunning enough to know that she was involved in big game and that minor informations she could provide to Lalthanga and party would only expose her sooner than later. So at first she had concentrated on winning over the confidence of Chowdhury, even at the cost of some annoyance of the underground. She had worked hard for this. Today when the big day had finally arrived and she was called upon to play her vital role, she had the implicit confidence of Chowdhury.

## ZORAMTHANGI

WHEN SHE CAME OUT OF CHOWDHURY'S ROOM SHE started planning to delay Chowdhury's departure for the visit. She waited without sending word to Dass and Sharma. Chowdhury, after waiting for some time, got irritated and asked Judy if the two officers were coming.

"Sir, I am so sorry. It completely slipped my mind. Sir, I will call them just now."

Chowdhury found it rather odd that Judy had forgotten something. She was not the type. He had always found her quick and competent in carrying out his commands. Did it mean anything, he thought ; then he dismissed the idea as absurd.

But Judy waited another few minutes before sending for Dass and Sharma. Dass was a tall, lanky man and he walked rapidly into Chowdhury's room. Sharma's room was next to the IGP's and he snuffed out his cigarette before entering.

Chowdhury looked up as Sharma sat down. He said : "I have to leave soon. So I will just put the problem before you and you can ponder over it. When I return, we can resume the discussion. Shall we say 6.00 P.M., would be all right ?"

Then without waiting for an answer, he continued : "We have received bits and pieces of information which are disturbing As you are aware the influence of Thanglura is on the wane. He and his men are getting desperate. He is reported to have directed his men to intensify their illegal activities."

Dass spoke : "Yesterday, a truck was fired upon near Saiha. Luckily no one was hurt but it is believed to be the handiwork of the underground."

Sharma also added his piece : "I have a report here, which I received an hour ago. In Lunglei, one Cachari trader was killed as he did not leave Lunglei before the deadline of 31st

### *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

December. And two similar reports have been received from Champhai. But Sir, the surprising aspect is that there has been a peculiar lull in Aijal ”

“That makes it seven persons killed since the expiry of the ‘Quit Mizoram’ notice”, said Chowdhury “But that is only one aspect of the operation. As to the lull in Aijal, we will revert to it shortly. What are the reports about the tax collection ?”

Sharma said : “There have been 27 complaints lodged with the Police Stations.”

Dass said : “And we can presume that there must be many more that have gone unreported.”

Chowdhury asked again : “Have any arrests been made ?”

Sharma replied : “In all, 12 underground men have been detained so far but we have practically no evidence against them.”

“I have an informer who has given me the disturbing bit of news that I mentioned a while ago. He tells me that the underground are planning to kill the Governor or failing that some other senior government official with a view to create a scare amongst the officials,” said Chowdhury. “Sharma, have you anything to say on that ?”

Sharma was taken aback for a moment. Then he said : “Sir, I am sorry that I have not really been able to develop many contacts within my ten days or so in Aijal. My sources have given me no such news. But I will try to check it up.”

“Do that,” said Chowdhury. “And Dass, I think you arrange to post a few extra guards for the Governor. Tighten security around the Secretariat and discreetly inform the officers to be careful. There is nothing to be panicky about but extra care will do no harm. I will like to go into the security aspect

## ZORAMTHANGI

when I return. I have also a few things in mind about the tax collection and the hounding of the non-Mizos. We can continue later."

So saying, he pushed back his chair.

The wall clock showed 3.55.

Just then Judy entered the room with empty tea cups and said cheerfully : "I ordered some tea for you all."

Chowdhury fell back in his chair, smiled and then said : What about my visit ? I will be late !"

"Sir, I have already informed them that you would be slightly late. They will wait. Even the Chief Engineer would be delayed by a few minutes."

"Oh good," exclaimed Chowdhury. He marvelled at this girl. Even a cup of tea was a test of efficiency for her. And he thought how right he had been in placing his trust in the Mizos. Could one find a better assistant than Judy ? And yet when he had arrived everybody had advised him against such a step. Even for his guards he was asked to take men from the Central Reserve Police. But he had refused. And rightly so ! And he would always be proud of his answer to this suggestion : "If I don't trust the Mizos, how can I win their trust ?" Many of his advisers had asked him to reconsider, but he had not budged.

Tea was delayed. While the officers continued their discussion, minutes flew by.

It was now 4.10 by the wall clock.

Chowdhury buzzed on the intercom and asked Judy to cancel the order for tea and ask the driver to bring his car to the front. But she said : "I am sorry, Sir. The milk they brought

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

got spoilt. And just now they have brought some fresh milk.  
Your tea will be there in half a minute."

When the tea was brought, it was exactly 4.20.

And the tea was scalding hot !

Chowdhury wondered if Judy was slipping. She should have known by now that he liked his tea luke warm. And yet she had brought the tea so hot that he could not touch it. Again he wondered if it had some special significance. And again he dismissed the idea.

Judy had left the room and the three officers were again left to themselves.

The clock showed 4.27.

Just as Chowdhury was trying to finish his tea and leave for his appointment, a jeep drove into the Police Headquarters. At the rickety gate, no attempt was made to stop it. As the jeep came to a screeching halt before the Chief's office nine men all dressed in police uniforms jumped out. The driver kept sitting and kept the motor running. As if by previous arrangement, two of them rushed towards the gate, another three walked briskly towards the IGP's room, while one stood outside its entrance. One more stood guarding the jeep and two fanned out to strategic points in the PHQ from where they could overlook the IGP's room. The driver of the jeep accelerated and reversed the vehicle, then sat waiting. It was suddenly so quiet that even the hum of the jeep engine could be heard clearly.

The three who entered Chowdhury's room were led by Lalthanga. The other two were Robert Manzuala and Kapliana. Kapliana had a revolver while the other two were armed with machineguns.

## ZORAMTHANGI

Chowdhury recognised all three of them at once. He had seen their photographs in the police records. Three confirmed, hardened criminals in the room of the Police Chief without even his knowledge ! It was a shocking intrusion into the security of the Police Headquarters. He found it difficult to reconcile to it. But overcoming his shock, he smiled at them and said :

"Well, well. You at the PHQ ? And that too in police uniforms ? To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, gentlemen ?"

He now remembered having seen a report in his papers regarding the theft of some police uniforms a few days back. At that time he had not attached much importance to it. Now he knew where they had gone.

Under his calm exterior, Chowdhury's mind was racing furiously, trying to think a way out of this desperate situation. The fact that the three intruders were known killers on the "wanted" list for a long time and were fully armed added to his anxiety.

Lalthanga was the first to speak :

"Don't try anything ! All of you...just keep your hands on the table. Then rise slowly. First you, then you and then you, Chief." The voice was cold and sharp. Dass got up slowly, followed by Sharma and Chowdhury.

Lalthanga spoke again : "Now follow me quietly."

Chowdhury's mind had so far failed to come up with an answer. Where were the damned security guards who were always outside the room ? Had they deserted their duties ? Were they in league with Lalthanga and party ? He realised with regret that the warning of his officers about the Mizo guards was now coming true. And where was Judy ? Why could she not come in now and raise the alarm ? Could she also have joined

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

them ? Though both Dass and Sharma were known to be courageous men, they both looked perturbed now and perhaps hoped that he would be able to get them out of this now potentially dangerous situation. What the hell could he do ? His mind was not working or was it the same ennui he had felt enveloping him earlier ?

Aloud he asked : "Where do you want us to go ?"

Lalthanga replied : "That is none of your concern. Just do as I say and no one gets hurt. Try anything funny and I'll blast your heads off."

Chowdhury was caught in a dilemma. If he went with them they could keep him hostage and dictate to the government. But could he go ? Would they go to the extent of killing right in the police building ? He wondered if they had planned their exit. He decided that they will not be so foolish as to indulge in shooting and still hope to get away. One shot and everybody in the PHQ would pounce on them. Chowdhury decided that he could push them, but just a little bit at a time. Play for time and see if something comes up, would be his strategy.

In a loud, clear voice he said : "Look, Lalthanga, this is the PHQ. I give the orders here, and no one else. So let us all sit down peaceably and discuss what you want from us."

No reaction so far except a slight bewilderment on the faces of the three intruders. Yes, he decided, he could push them a little more !

He slowly and deliberately sat down. Then he motioned by a nod of his head to Dass and Sharma also to sit down. They followed.

Then it all happened in moments.

## ZORAMTHANGI

Chowdhury felt that he was going to sneeze. Involuntarily his hand went to his pocket for his hanky. There was a sudden roar as the two machineguns spewed fire. All the three police officers crumpled in their chairs, dead.

Lalthanga muttered : "The fools ! Let's go."

Quietly they walked out, went to the waiting jeep and climbed in. Their other companions also backed into the jeep which then drove away without being challenged or intercepted. They drove, as planned, on a jungle track to a place inside the dense forest. Then near a clump of trees they stopped, took off their police uniforms and burnt them. The jeep was abandoned and all of them disappeared in different directions.

## 14

LALTHANGA WENT TO THE HOUSE OF ZORAMTHANGI directly. He found that she was not yet home. He had a key to the house and entered and sat down waiting for her. He lit a cigarette and pondered over what he had just done. He felt a great sense of achievement.

He knew that within hours the news would have been flashed all over the country and may be the world. Now people will sit up and ask "Who are the Mizos ? Where is Mizoram ? Why were the police officers killed ? What motivated those who killed them ?" The plight of the Mizos will now surely catch the eyes of the world. The Mizos would themselves realise that they themselves were not powerless, that they could play a hand in deciding their future and that it was not as if their men were

## ZORAMTHANGI

sitting idle. They had proved that they could do what they liked and do it well. This would perhaps help Thanglura get over his financial difficulties and the fresh recruits would rush to join the organisation. The image of the organisation would definitely get a boost. But he also knew that as soon as the news spread, the trail would become too hot for him. Although the three police officers who had seen him, were dead, there could be no getting away from the fact that many others must have seen him or guessed that he was involved. He also realised that for him, as the prime killer, there would in any case be no escape. They must have put the whole Army and police on his trail by now. Some of his own colleagues may squeal. And he had to concede that the police intelligence was good and they had informers amongst the underground. Not good enough to prevent him from achieving his goal, but still good. He realised with a tinge of regret that his presence in Aijal was too well known to the police and he would be suspected even as the news spread. The idea to split after the killing was his. He wanted to give every one the maximum opportunity to escape on his own and create that many trails for the police to chase. Together they may have felt tethered or burdened. Every one on his own was the best. He only hoped that Judy would maintain her cover and not blow it up. He was determined to have one last fling with Zoramthangi and then leave Aijal for some time, at least till things cooled down. Next morning with the barriers around the town pulled down, it would be far more difficult for him to get away, but what the hell ! He couldn't leave without meeting Zo one last time. Sprightly girl that ! Out of the so many girls he had met, befriended and slept with, Zo was in a class by herself. He liked her temper and he liked her independence. Zo would not be happy on learning of the incident but they had decided to follow their own different ways and yet be together.

When Zo did not arrive till 7.00 he started getting worried.  
Was she caught up in the aftermath of the incident ?

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Zo came much later. Unaware of the curfew that had been clamped down on the town, she had left the school later than usual and was promptly detained by the police. It was only when Kapoor came to the Police Station and identified her that she was released. Then he asked her where she was going.

Zo replied : "Home ! After finishing school I had some work that delayed me. Then these people brought me here."

Kapoor said : "I am going in the same direction. Come, I will drop you there because on your own you will be stopped again."

They got into the jeep and Kapoor asked the driver to proceed. On the way, Zo asked : "If I am not being too curious, can you tell me why this curfew now ?"

Kapoor raised his arm to acknowledge the salute from a bunch of policemen standing by the side of the road and said : "Have you not heard ? Three senior police officers were murdered this afternoon. The whole city is under curfew and nobody is allowed on the road."

Kapoor stopped the jeep near the house of Zo and got down. "Wouldn't you come inside ?" asked Zo, seeing that Kapoor was getting back into the jeep. Lalthanga sitting near the window saw them, picked up his revolvar and released the safety catch.

Kapoor got behind the steering wheel and replied : "Not now. May be some other time. Just now I am in a hurry."

Zo insisted : "Please. It wouldn't take much time. You have come so far, I think your work could wait for a few more minutes."

"In fact, I had to go in this direction only. I am on the look out for the criminals involved in today's crime. One of

## ZORAMTHANGI

them has given us the clue that the main culprit has gone in this direction.”

Kapoor nodded to the driver, waived at Zo and drove away. Lalthanga realised that what Kapoor had said just now meant that one of them had been arrested. Which one could it be ? It meant that soon the net would be cast wider and his escape would become more difficult. Anyway, he must make the best of the present. He put back his gun and relaxed. During these last few hours with Zo, he could not have any problems on his mind.

When Zo entered the room, she was not surprised to see Lalthanga. This had happened many times before and sometimes he came only for a few hours.

Lalthanga pretended that he had heard nothing of the conversation outside the house. He said : “ Didn’t you make me wait today ?”

Zo replied : “ Oh I got delayed. There is trouble in the town.”

“ That’s nothing unusual with your Indians running the show. What’s the trouble about ?”

“ Some police officers have been killed.”

“ Serves them right ! The bloodsuckers ! When any of our brothers is killed, they don’t feel anything. And now they must be running around in circles. Anyway let’s not talk about these unpleasant things now. I am starving. Is there anything to eat ?”

“ I’ll cook something quickly.”

“ Good. Meantime I can have a quick bath Is there enough water ?”

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"I think so."

Zo whipped up an omelette, heated the curry she had made in the morning and kept some rice on the boil. During the dinner, they did not speak much. Lalthanga went straight to bed after the meal. Zo got up and cleaned the table. When she was preparing for the bed she saw Lalthanga's coat and instinctively put her hand in the pockets. She found nothing. But as she put the coat back she noticed the brownish stains on the inside. An attempt had been made to wash them but only superficially. She looked, then, at where Lalthanga was lying smoking and saw the revolver by the side of the bed. This was unusual. He had never displayed his gun like this before. She waited a while longer not knowing what to do.

Lalthanga shouted : "Zo, are you coming to bed or not ? Haven't you made me wait enough ? Come on, my pet."

She moved slowly, hesitatingly towards the bed. Lalthanga suddenly got up from the bed and in one quick motion picked her up and threw her on the bed. Then he kissed her roughly on the lips and with one hand tore off her clothes. She was usually roused by his rough, almost primitive love-making but today she froze at his touch. She had to struggle to overcome the sense of revulsion that was welling up in her. How could he do it ? Kill three persons and then make love? All within a few hours ? But Lalthanga's mouth was demanding and his hands were exploring spots all over her body. He started fondling with her breasts, then kissing them and sucking them.

He whispered : "My God ! What loveliness."

She felt as if somebody was strangling her. "Oh no ! not tonight please," she managed to say. It was at that time that Lalthanga said something that momentarily broke all her defences, and all her resistance. "I love you," he said, "but tonight,

## ZORAMTHANGI

I'll love you for, probably, the last time. I may never return though it will be my most cherished desire to do so."

As Zo started to say something again, he showered a spate of kisses on her mouth. Moments later, when he entered her, she felt as if she had been stabbed by the revolver lying on the side table and felt like throwing up. She found herself in the iron grip of Lalthanga and could do nothing. Lalthanga was puffing away and she wondered if he would go on and on until she died of suffocation. Lalthanga, mercifully for Zo, reached his explosive climax and with a groan collapsed on top of her. She nearly screamed out of fright as she imagined Lalthanga's dead body falling over her in a heap. But Lalthanga had noticed nothing. He lay back contented and said : "It was great ! Thanks." He lit a cigarette as Zo got up and went to the bathroom. Zo bolted the bathroom from inside and then threw up.

She came out after quite some time. She saw that Lalthanga was snoring. She sat down on the easy-chair and started to think. She picked up one of Lalthanga's cigarettes and lit it. What a man was this. Courageous, a dare-devil but hell bent to kill, murder and destroy. They had good times together. He was an expert lover and her first. He could take her to heights of passion that made her dizzy and left her drained. If only she had been able to reform him. He would have been a...She did not realise when she dozed off. It was early morning when she woke up. She found the bed empty and Lalthanga gone. This again was not unusual. But today she had a peculiar feeling. It seemed as if Lalthanga had only been a dream, and now that she had woken up, he no longer existed.

LALTHANGA LEFT ZORAMTHANGI'S HOUSE MUCH before dawn had broken out. He walked briskly towards the forest which he knew so well. Weaving through the intricate

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

network of mud tracks leading across the forest he reached the outskirts of the village Luangmual about fifteen miles away. He had decided after much thought that this would be a comparatively safer hideout till the night fall. His most optimistic plan was to walk through the nights, hide during the day and cross the border. Then hopefully lie low till the heat had subsided. It was getting to be nearly six in the morning as he looked at his watch, standing on the flat of the hill overlooking the village. Scanning the village panorama, he saw that enough number people were already moving about for him to get mixed up with them and get lost. He moved quickly and joined the group of men and women standing near the water tap. A woman looked up at him and smiled. No one else paid any attention to him. Fifty yards away there was a thatch hut which served for a tea shop. Quietly he moved into the tea shop and asked the old man, who doubled as bearer and proprietor of the establishment, to get him a cup of tea and some bread. Sipping his tea, he scrutinised the half a dozen men who were sitting, drinking their tea and talking. All of them were from Luangmual. His arrival in the tea shop had invited a few curious glances but nobody had talked to him or asked him anything. He relaxed. These were his own men and nobody would talk. Though they may not even raise a finger to protect him, nobody would get any information out of them. He leisurely finished his tea and bread, and got up to go out. As he went to the old man to make his payment, the man who was sitting across also got up and walked towards him quickly. Lalthanga's hand went immediately for his revolver. But the man was upon him before Lalthanga could do anything. He almost hissed at him and whispered : "The whole village is full of police. Get out as soon as you can." The man walked out first ; Lalthanga tarried for a minute, then he also stepped out. It was a bright sunny day.

## ZORAMTHANGI

AJAI KAPOOR, IT WAS, WHO WAS ENTRUSTED WITH the job of tracking Lalthanga and bringing him to book. Luangmual had long been a hotbed of underground activities and the chances were that some of the assassins of the police officers would try to escape through this village or hide there till the things cooled down. He had not expected even in his wildest dreams that the most prize catch of all would fall into his trap. Kapoor decided that he would cut off the attempted escape at Luangmual itself. He alongwith his party had arrived in the village late last night. He had immediately deployed his men, numbering about thirty, all over the village. He himself lay down on the bare ground under the open sky in the hot sultry night. No point in alerting the local police just now. That could be attended to in the morning.

He knew the village well from his earlier visits there and also knew that if the hostiles had already crossed the village and entered the jungle on the other side, they could do nothing. The underground knew the jungle tracks like the back of their hands and no policeman could pursue them there.

He dozed off and slept intermittently in his exposed retreat. When he finally woke up, it was just after six. Just as he was planning to get up and contact his survey parties, a constable came running to him and stood there, breathless.

"What is it, Jaisingh ?" asked Kapoor.

"Sir, Lalthanga has just walked into the village." Kapoor jumped up at once and asked : "Where is he now ?"

"He is just now in the tea shop at the corner of the village "

Kapoor tied his belt hurriedly, checked his revolver and started to run : "How many men are with him ?"

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

“He is all alone.”

“Is somebody keeping track of him ?”

“Yes sir.”

Kapoor then asked the two men who were there with him to come with him and started running towards the tea shop, followed close on his heels by the other policemen. As he was running, he shouted instructions at his men :

“We'll wait for him to come out in the open. Don't rush him. He would be too willing to kill. Under no circumstances is he to be allowed to escape.”

Meanwhile the policeman who had brought the news of Lalthanga's arrival in the village had collected more policemen.

At the water-point, Kapoor's man gave him a signal to say that Lalthanga was still inside the tea shop. The policemen fanned out all along the row of houses on the street, invisible to anyone in the tea shop, but able to see one another, and also keep an eye on the solitary exist of the tea shop.

As Lalthanga stepped out of the tea shop, he sensed the police presence and realised that he was already in the trap. At the tea shop everyone came out and stood watching. He started walking slowly on the path that he knew would lead him after a distance of 500 yards into the forest. Once in the forest, he was sure, he would be able to outrun and outwit the police. If they were chasing him ! Or would it be better to enter one of the thatched houses on either side of the street and let them flush him out. And for sure when he did come out he would come out shooting. It wouldn't be so easy for them to get him then. Then he recalled the whispered warning in the tea shop and realised that once he entered a house, with so many policemen swarming the village, he would have closed his escape route and

## ZORAMTHANGI

would not come out alive. He decided to walk slowly and when the opening to the forest came, make a run for it. Then he saw with the corner of his eye, a policeman on the front slope and another on the top of the house on the right. He cautiously turned back and saw another trailing him. Just then he heard a loud shout :

"Lalthanga, you are covered from all sides. Throw down your gun and raise your hands."

In one motion he turned and started shooting. He saw Kapoor and two others approaching from the front. He took careful aim at Kapoor and was about to fire when all of a sudden and in unison almost all the policemen fired and he was mowed down by a hail of bullets. He writhed for a moment and then lay still—dead.

IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING THE POLICE OFFICERS' murder in Aijal there was hectic activity all around. The authorities determined to root out disorder and lawlessness acted promptly and the new IGP, Bedi, accompanied by a set of loyal officers took over within two days of Chowdhury's death. Bedi had a difficult task in fishing out the treacherous elements in his own force, and build up the morale of the civil administration. But his background inspired confidence. Having worked in the Army as well as the Border Security Force, Bedi had long experience in handling investigations of many cases connected with Mizo insurgency.

Kapoor investigated the case vigorously and followed up every cue. The interrogation also led him to the door of Zoramthangi and he met her a number of times. Through her evidence he was able to nail Lalthanga and even though he had died in the encounter at Luangmual, Zoramthangi's evidence proved decisive. Though he was not very happy about the rela-

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

tionship of Zo with Lalthanga that emerged from his investigations, he reconciled himself by thinking that Lalthanga was now dead and in any case everyone had a right to find his or her own lover. He continued a very hectic schedule of life due to the investigations, which the government had decided should be wrapped up quickly to restore the confidence of the public in the law and order machinery.

THE NEW POLICE CHIEF STARTED A POLICY OF ruthless pursuit of the underground. Rapidly he built up a regular system of informers and was able to get information in advance of the moves of the "hostiles" as they came to be known now after the triple murder. As a result, he was able to forestall most of the pre-planned underground activities and actions. A number of the active hostiles were shot down in encounters like that of Lalthanga. Quite a few were arrested with the help of the informers. Many were forced to flee from their hideouts which they had used for years as the danger of their being trapped became imminent. By May, almost all the persons involved in the police officers' murder case had either been arrested or shot dead except Robert Manzuala who had foiled all attempts to catch him. A prize of Rs. 10,000 was set on his head. But he could be found nowhere near the scene of action. Finding themselves leaderless, relentlessly pursued by the security forces and the police, having suffered many losses in men and material and having lost their sources of money, the underground were almost on their knees.

Being a psychologically favourable moment, the government announced a number of progressive schemes that promised to take Mizoram on to the road to prosperity. Construction of roads was taken up on a large scale, schemes for supply of water to remote village were implemented and a scheme to bring hydro-electric power was drawn up. Medical and education facilities

## ZORAMTHANGI

were improved and opening of new schools on modern lines was encouraged. Supply of foodgrains was ensured by opening a large number of fair price shops and people were educated in productive methods of agriculture, animal husbandry and horticulture. It was also announced that those of the underground surrendering voluntarily would be rehabilitated with full backing and would also get financial support.

Intensive negotiations were held between the underground leaders and the government representatives and on 1st July 1976 an agreement was signed. But violations of the provisions of the agreement by the underground started even before the ink had dried on the paper. Their leaders also disowned the agreement. Despite that, the government continued to explore every possibility for a negotiated settlement.

It was in this background that in 1977 it was announced by the authorities that seventy former underground members would surrender their arms to the Governor. The people were invited to watch the ceremony.

Zoramthangi decided to go for the ceremony which was to be held at the Theatre Hall in Aijal. She had somehow felt that the era of peace was around the corner and wanted to see for herself this positive step being taken in that direction. She had so far met only Lalthanga and Robert from the underground activists and wanted to see also the common run of the men who had left their hearth and home for an impossible ideal and were now returning to the flock, disillusioned. The ceremony was to start at 11.00 in the morning and Zo came and took her seat in a corner of the hall. She had managed to obtain a pass through Kapoor.

Inside the hall there was a hush of expectancy. On one side there was a huge table on which weaponry of a wide variety was displayed. At the other end of the hall where she was sitting,

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

she could see a group of persons seated who were to surrender Ahead of her in the same side were rows of chairs occupied by high government functionaries. At exactly 11.00 the Governor walked in and the National Anthem was played.

Then she saw that a man who must have been well past sixty arose and saluted the Governor. He was obviously the leader of the surrendering group. The leader then asked the Governor to inspect the group that was ranged behind him. Zo got the impression that most of the persons the Governor was now inspecting and talking to were either old men, too old to fight, or young strapping youth whose age could be in the range of eighteen to twenty. Were these the men who were expected to fight against the armed might of a large country ? Were they in a position to carry on this unequal struggle ? Were they not fully justified in giving up a life with no hope of success ? And was it fair to expect that these men either at the evening of their lives or at the dawn of theirs could give everything away for a mere impossible dream ? Were they not entitled to live the normal life, men of their ages lived ? Were they not entitled to a family, to children, to a house ? Were they not justified in giving up a life full of uncertainties and vague hopes ?

After the Governor's inspection, everybody listened with rapt attention as the leader of the surrendering group started speaking. Zo was for some time unable to withdraw her thoughts back to the present. Then she heard that his voice was soft and he spoke haltingly. He was saying :

"We have given prolonged and careful consideration before coming to this important decision. We have for many years lived in jungles and made sacrifices. It was not, therefore, easy to take this step of renouncing this organisation and the cause for which we had worked. However, what we have seen over the years has convinced us about the futility of this cause. The slogan of independence for Mizoram which was raised by

## ZORAMTHANGI

certain leaders more than a decade ago was a futile dream but many of us got attracted by it. We now realise that armed insurgency in Mizoram has brought nothing but misery and suffering to the people. We also realise that Mizoram can have a place of honour as an integral part of India and that the culture, religion and the way of life of Mizo people is fully secure within India.

"Based on the above considerations, we are surrendering today, and we seek the help of not only the government but also of our Mizo brethren for our rehabilitation as useful members of the society. On this occasion we would also appeal to our brethren who are still underground to carefully consider all the circumstances and take a bold step by coming out, thus bringing lasting peace to Mizoram."

THE TRIAL OF THE SIX PERSONS CONNECTED WITH the triple murder started in Aijal and was carried on from day to day. It was revealed that in November 1974 Lalthanga came to Aijal from the underground headquarters, located in Arrakan Hills in Burma and went to the house of Judy Lalmanghai on 16th November. He had brought the "Quit Mizoram" notice with him. The notice was displayed on the walls of Aijal the next day asking all non-Mizos to leave Mizoram by 31st December. After the arrival of Lalthanga in Aijal the underground activities suddenly picked up momentum. One driver of the Border Roads Organisation was murdered. His body was found hanging at Lengpui with an inscription found nearby saying that he was killed for marrying a Mizo girl. On the 13th and the 17th December two more bodies were found hanging in Aijal. In that month alone two murders, one case of stabbing, five cases of looting and extortion, four cases of threats of killing and ten cases of criminal intimidation were reported in Aijal. Somehow or the other, Lalthanga was connected with all these cases. During the first

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

fortnight of January 1965, however, there was a sudden lull in all violent activities.

On 1st January 1975, Lalthanga told Kapliana that he had orders from his headquarters to kill the Police Chief and that he should arrange for some men and money for the purpose. Kapliana detailed six men for the job and paid Rs. 3,000 to Lalthanga. From this money Lalthanga arranged for the uniforms to be stolen from the police store-room. On 6th January a meeting was held in the house of Judy where all the men provided by Kapliana, Lalthanga, Kapliana himself and Robert Manzuala were present.

On the 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th January, the accused tried to kill the Police Chief on way to his office and lay an ambush. Each day Chowdhury took a different route and so the accused could get no opportunity to successfully carry out their plan. They also waited on the High School ground overlooking the house of the IGP with a view to kill him as he had a habit of playing with his dogs and basking in the sun in the morning. Chowdhury, however, did not come out of his house on those days as he was unwell.

Earlier, on the 7th January at 4.00 in the afternoon, a meeting took place in the house of Judy, where the weapons were taken out from the bathroom and they were properly cleaned. After a short speech by Lalthanga in which he commended their objective to the others and said that since nothing had happened after the "Quit Mizoram" notice, which seemed to have been ignored by the non-Mizos, the plan they were setting out to implement was a very important one. The weapons were distributed to the underground. Since the attempts to murder Chowdhury had failed on the earlier days, Lalthanga asked Kapliana to arrange for a jeep and a driver. A government department jeep was then arranged. January 12th was a Sunday and nothing happened on that day. Lalthanga gathered his team which gathered again at

## ZORAMTHANGI

Judy's house. Duties were arranged. After a final briefing one scout was sent to see whether Chowdhury's car was parked outside the Police Headquarters. When he returned at about 4.00 P.M., all the conspirators dressed in police uniforms—Lalthanga as Sub Inspector and the others as constables—walked towards the Sairang Road and picked up the jeep which was parked at a pre-arranged place. Thereafter they killed Chowdhury, Dass and Sharma in the Police Chief's office. Judy Lalmanghai was arrested within half an hour of the murder. Out of the conspirators involved in the murder case, Lalthanga, Kapliana and one other had already been killed in encounters with the police, while Robert Manzuala had escaped arrest so far. Of the other six, Judy and three others were sentenced to life imprisonment while two were acquitted for want of evidence against them.

## 15

MANZUALA HAD BEEN PURSUED RELENTLESSLY BY the police and the Army ever since that day in Lungdai when he had killed the three soldiers. With every one of his new criminal acts, the chase was intensified but Manzuala was far too quick and knew the inner recesses of the jungles so well that every time he would disappear even before the chase really began. But he was always itching for more action and it was with difficulty that he could stay in the jungle hideouts for even brief periods. He would come out, indulge in his horrendous depredations and would wait for the chase to gather pace before suddenly vanishing. It had become a matter of pleasure with him—to play this dangerous game to the hilt, to make men feel his power. The authorities had announced a reward of Rs. 10,000 for the arrest of this dangerous man—dead or alive.

## ZORAMTHANGI

And his arrest was an anti climax.

He had just come out of the jungle and was planning his next move. He went to a friend's house in Saiba and after his dinner went to sleep. While he was sleeping and was alone in the house, a police party came there on getting the intimation of his presence, swooped upon him before he could open his eyes, disarmed and arrested him. He was ordered to be brought to Ajai for undergoing his trial. However, when the bus by which he was being brought by one Sub Inspector and the three constables stopped at a wayside village to pick up a passenger, Manzuala tried to throw off his captors and ran out. He managed to reach the edge of the forest on the downhill side. It was dark and there was every possibility of his succeeding in escaping. The policemen warned him to stop and when he did not heed the warning they fired at him killing him on the spot.

KAPOOR TOOK ZO DIRECTLY TO HER HOUSE AFTER THE funeral of Robert Manzuala, dead at the age of twenty-eight years. Though Robert had followed a radically different way of life and had not been with her for the last ten years or so she felt grieved in a sincere manner as he had been steadfast in what he believed to be the right thing for his people. Zo was downcast and felt miserable. Kapoor tried to cheer her up by just being with her. He knew that she would get over her grief in course of time.

"Look, Zo, whatever else, he was a brave man. He lived dangerously and there was no other way for him," Ajai said one day.

"But your people killed him like an animal, hunted from place to place. He was a cripple and your men could have at least shown some consideration."

"He was a cripple, no doubt. But he was more dangerous and crafty than any of his able-bodied companions. And no one

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

can justify the killing of innocent men brutally and heartlessly as he used to do. A man like that did not deserve any consideration. Yet he was only being brought to Ajai. He tried to escape. What else could the guards do?"

"That is your story. Not many people believe it. Lalthanga, Kapilana and so many others—they were all killed in so-called encounters. Isn't it too much of a coincidence?"

"Zo, what are you trying to say? You have always put things in their proper perspective. What's happened to you today? Yes, it may seem to you that the incidents raise some suspicion—I do not know what sort of—but don't forget that all the killers of the three Police Officers were wanted for murder and were armed, dangerous, confirmed, hardened criminals. Should we have gone to them with folded hands? They resisted arrest and were stopped in the only way they could be, and the only way they understood. What is wrong with that?"

"Oh, Ajai, if only you could understand the state of my mind! My confusion! Robert was the last member of my family alive. And I have seen so much violence in my life so far that I can hardly stand any more. I only wish there was some way of stopping this. And not knowing what the future has in store for me—only vague fears—I probably get more and more entangled in my confusion."

Kapoor's next words came to Zo as suddenly as the lightning which waves across the vast sky :

"Let's get married. Then you can start a new family."

For a moment, shocked into speechlessness, Zo just stared at him. Then she spoke as if in a stupor :

"Ajai, nothing would make me happier but..."

## ZORAMTHANGI

"No Ajai, let's not decide anything in a hurry. There are so many things we should discuss before we take any step. And the present moment is hardly the most appropriate one to discuss a marriage proposal."

"Zo, I know what you mean. But any time is good enough to discuss the future of two persons. I may have to soon go away for some time, again on duty. And I am always in favour of not letting an opportunity slip. What is worrying you?"

"Ajai, I still think we should sit down calmly and discuss."

"Darling Zo, there's nothing to discuss. We know each other for more than five years. We are, I think, sensible, mature persons and we are not rushing into anything. If there is anyone else or anything else you would like to consider, it's a different matter then."

"Ajai, you know there is no one else ..There was at one time. But that time is now past. There is nothing else either. But I would like us to think over calmly and dispassionately the outcome of such a marriage."

"What outcome are you talking about ?"

"The consequences of a marriage of a *Vai* Police Officer and a Mizo teacher ! Can you imagine the furore this is going to cause ?"

"Zo, together, you and I, should be able to conquer any storm. What is there to think about ?"

"I am sorry if I sound diffident. You know I'm not. But I would like to wait for some time—give time to let the thought sink in. It has been such a surprise to me but let me add, a very very pleasant one."

"All right. I see your point. Let us give it some more time. But I think it will be better to make an announcement

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

so as to give the people a chance to vent their opinions also. We will know our friends' reactions also. But let me tell you now that I am determined to marry you whatever the people say."

"Ajai, I am so glad."

Kapoor took her in his arms and kissed her longingly, endearingly—it was the first time ever he had done so.

A FEW DAYS LATER, KAPOOR ARRANGED A SMALL exclusive party at his house for which a few of his colleagues in the police and a couple of Zo's teacher friends were present. It was announced that Kapoor and Zoramthangi were getting engaged and that the marriage would be celebrated sometime in November, five months later. The friends were genuinely happy for the couple and all of them wished them well!.

After all the guests had left, Ajai Kapoor and Zoramthangi now sat down to chat for a few minutes before Ajai saw Zo home. He said :

"I am so happy. At least the state of uncertainty is over."

"So am I, Ajai. But for me the uncertainty is not yet over."

"I think you are worrying too much for nothing. Everything will be all right."

"You see what worries me more than anything else is that we do not have any elder in the family—yours or mine—who could advise us correctly, guide us properly. I have some vague fears about all this. With no one to tell us if we are doing the right thing..."

## ZORAMTHANGI

Kapoor spoke quickly : "Oh, no it is not like that. Father Jacob is there. I will request him to come for the marriage. He may even come a few days earlier."

"That will be very nice of him. But Ajai, it is late. Can you drop me home ?"

NEXT DAY KAPOOR WROTE TO FATHER JACOB telling him of his engagement to Zoramthangi and inviting him to his marriage to be held later. He received a prompt reply wishing him all the best with a promise to attend the marriage. Kapoor was delighted.

But what had been happening in Aijal did not give him or Zo much to be delighted about. First of all a whispering campaign started against Kapoor. The background of Zoramthangi as being the sister of a leading hostile and a former mistress of a known killer was raised. DSP Ajai Kapoor was discreetly, though indirectly, told that it may not be in his interest to marry such a girl. Kapoor was pained by this. But his determination got stronger. If Zo's brother was a criminal, was it her fault ? Could anyone raise even a finger of suspicion against her ? As for her affair with Lalthanga, it was an entirely personal matter and even then no one could say that she had in any way assisted him or passed on any information to him. His colleagues also started voicing doubts against such a step. Then he received a letter from the underground warning him to desist from marrying a Mizo girl with the threat of dire consequences for himself. He laughed it off as he had already been anticipating such threats. Zoramthangi herself received written as well as verbal warnings and was told by many of her friends that the decision to marry a *Vai* police officer would be full of dangerous consequences for her also. In the beginning both remained unperturbed and decided to ignore the advice so freely being tendered to them. Then one day, of all the things, a colleague of

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Kapoor told him there was this also that even the Police Chief did not view his proposed alliance favourably and that he was thinking of officially intervening in the matter. Kapoor was highly disturbed. He decided to meet Bedi and clear the matter with him personally.

Bedi's reaction came to Kapoor as a pleasant surprise. An elderly person, Bedi had a paternal attitude towards his officers. When Kapoor asked him point blank about his views on his forthcoming marriage with a Mizo girl, Bedi replied : "Son, you are a brave man. Your services have not gone unrecognised. You go ahead and do what you think is right. And if you finally decided to marry this Mizo girl, you will have all my blessings. But only be careful."

"Sir, I am grateful and I can't tell you how happy and relieved I am by your response. But 'careful' in what way ?"

"Every courageous act creates enemies who either overcome you or are vanquished. Your act will leave many people unhappy and, maybe, fuming inside, only beware of them."

Kapoor left highly pleased with himself. He knew that the old man meant every word of what he had said. He pondered over the warning but decided that he could not do much about it except to be more careful in his movements.

He decided to go ahead in spite of all the odds.

But Zoramthangi was having her own doubts. She was somehow quite certain that nothing would happen to her. But she was not so sure about Ajai's safety. She knew that the warnings from the underground were meant to be deadly serious and were pointedly directed against Ajai. She had seen too much violence already with all her loved ones dying of unnatural deaths. She did not want to invite any trouble for Ajai whom she loved deeply and admired almost like a hero. His steadfast-

## ZORAMTHANGI

ness had won her heart and he was the last person she wanted to see get hurt in the whole business.

So one day she spoke to Ajai :

"Look Ajai. I think we need to decide the matter one way or the other !

Kapoor interrupted her : "What way ? We have already decided. Is there anything left to be decided even now ?"

"Yes Ajai, there is. The new things that have cropped up have to be considered before a final decision emerges."

Slightly irritated, Ajai asked : "Can you name even a single one ?"

"Yes," said Zo in a soft, persuasive manner without the slightest inflection in her voice. She realised to some extent the peculiar dilemma that confronted Ajai and knew that he was brave enough to ignore the danger and probably hoped he would be able to avoid it by not trying to tame it by the horns. "Ajai, we can no more shut over eyes to the things going on around us," she said quite decisively.

Kapoor interrupted her again : "What things are you talking about ? Only yesterday my boss has offered all support and encouraged me to go ahead."

Zo had infinite patience, particularly so with Ajai, for whom her love and admiration were boundless. She said affably : "I am talking about the threatening letters you have received, the telephone calls you have received and the warnings that have been issued to me. Ajai, I am afraid that these are not empty threats. Well, nothing will deter me. But Ajai, I'm still afraid that these are not empty threats. Yes, but nothing will deter me. Yet

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Ajai, I cannot afford to have anything happening to you. These threats. We cannot just ignore them. It could mean that the plans we have made for our marriage may have to be revised."

With the problem having been put before him so succinctly, Kapoor relaxed immediately. So, this was the type of bond they had built between themselves—Zo and him—complementary to each other. A feeling of great love for this woman surged up in him. She was worried about his safety more than her own. Tackling problems was his job and he was not dismayed or agitated by them. Now that the problem had been posed, it had to be solved before moving ahead. He regained his cool and spoke with equanimity : "I think, Zo, that both of us knew that this kind of thing was going to happen when we decided to get married."

"No. Engaged."

"Yes. Engaged. But engagement was more or less a decisive step towards marriage. We anticipated all this harassment. Only we misjudged the extent of the reaction. And now I think we differ on the likely outcome. I do not believe that we should take these cautions, and blackmailing tactics at all seriously. The resentment if any will die down in due course. I do not see any reason that warrants a change in our plans."

"Ajai, it is easier said than done. I have an uneasy feeling about the whole business. These people could be dangerous, you know."

"Oh sure, I know. But what has our marriage got to do with them ? With the Police Chief giving me his blessings my worries are over. I think we should now fix a date for our marriage. In our case only you and I have to decide."

## ZORAMTHANGI

"Are you sure, Ajai? Don't you think we should wait a little longer?"

"Yes, I am sure. And no, the waiting is over. Let us set an early date. How many days do you need for your preparations? Ten? Okay, take fifteen. So let it be 18th November."

SO THE MARRIAGE WAS ANNOUNCED. AND KAPOOR sent a telegram to Father Jacob intimating him the date and asking him to come to Ajail as soon as possible. Three days after the announcement, Kapoor received a telephone call at his office telling him to cancel the marriage failing which he would be physically prevented from going through the ceremony. The call was traced to an office but the officer in whose room the telephone was kept was on leave on that day. He did not tell Zo about this call. But she kept on fidgeting and worrying. Her heart was somehow not in it. Then Father Jacob arrived and with him came a breath of fresh air.

He was a tall man, now about seventy years old. Of dark complexion, he had big, dark-grey eyes, thick lips and a flat, large nose. There was a peculiar serenity on his face and he spoke in a thick guttural voice, slowly and softly. But he had an effortless way of speaking which compelled attention. When he met Zoramthangi, he was delighted.

"My dear daughter!" he said. "I think Ajai is a very lucky boy to have found a beautiful bride like you. I am seeing you for the first time today. But I have known you for long. Ajai has been writing to me about you. I am happy for him and for you. For, Ajai, I can tell you, is a gem of a boy. He has had little joy in his life so far. I am sure he will get all the happiness that he ever wanted, from you."

"Father, I will do my best."

### *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

"Let me also tell you, my daughter, that you have chosen wisely. A more sincere and loving husband you could not have found. A braver, more courageous man, would be difficult to come by. I pray to Almighty God to grant you both eternal happiness."

"Father, I am so grateful to you. But there is a problem. I do not know whether Ajai has told you. But it worries me endlessly. And it is due to this fear that I am feeling almost dead and unable to feel the happiness of the moment."

"What is it dear girl? Ajai has not told me any such thing."

"Father, in deciding to marry me he has made a lot of enemies. And they may harm him," she told him the background, holding back nothing, feeling like telling him everything.

"Trust in God. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune but do not distress yourself with imaginings. You have come so far. Now go ahead and do not worry yourself too much. By the Almighty's grace, everything will turn out well."

THOUGH COLD, 18TH NOVEMBER WAS A SUNNY DAY. Zo got up with a mild headache. It had been a long night for her with sleep coming to her only in the early hours of the morning. The question that had been haunting her all through the sleepless night was that she was on the threshold of a new chapter in her life. Would she cross it? The suspense was overpowering.

For Kapoor, who had taken leave for ten days, starting that day, it was a bright, cheerful morning. He was looking forward to his holidays, which would be his first in his entire service

## ZORAMTHANGI

period so far. More than anything else, he was looking forward to Zo becoming his own. He was in buoyant spirits. Everything was settled. Only he had to wait for 11.00 A.M. He had agreed to a civil marriage because it was simpler. He did not have the wherewithal for a traditional marriage with a wedding party, decorations and feasting, etc. He was alone and Zo was alone, except for Father Jacob and a few friends. So the best course was to go to the Magistrate and get over with the formality. Security-wise also, it was safer. He could obviously take no chances.

The rendezvous had been fixed at 11.00 A.M. outside the Magistrate's Court. Zo would come there with her friends and then they would go and complete the papers.

The clock ticked away. Kapoor got up to get ready.

When he came out of his room, it was 10.45. Dressed in a navy blue suit and a maroon silk tie, he looked handsome. He waited for Father Jacob to come down.

Father Jacob's face opened in a wide grin when he saw Ajai.

"Ajai, my son, you look dashing. I beseech God to shower upon you and your bride his choicest blessings. It is time. Let us go."

They got into the black Ambassador car, which had been placed at Kapoor's disposal for the day by the Police Chief followed by a jeep-load of armed policemen.

When they reached the Magistrate's Court, Zo was already there. She looked ravishingly beautiful in her white bridal dress.

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

The brief ceremony complete, the Magistrate shook hands with Kapoor and Zo and wished them a happy married life.

Both then went to Father Jacob who also blessed the newly-married couple. After some more shaking of hands, both came out and down the stairs from the Magistrate's Court. The Ambassador car was still waiting downstairs. It was to carry them to Kapoor's house, after which they would be on their own. At the bottom of the stairs, a row of Kapoor's colleagues and friends were waiting. As Zo got into the car, Kapoor mumbled a quick farewell to them and followed Zo in. He nodded to the driver and the car started off.

The friends of Zo and Kapoor, who were left behind at the staircase outside the Magistrate's Court saw the Ambassador drive off, and then turned to go their own different ways. One of them was to drop Father Jacob home. At that particular moment they heard an explosion, and saw the car now about 300 yards away, twist grotesquely to one side and hit the side berm of the road. At the same time, they saw two ball-like round objects tossed into the now stationary car, followed by two more explosions. Even before they started running towards the car, a crowd had collected there and someone pulled out the unconscious Zo. Confusion was total in those few moments and before the body of Kapoor and the driver could be extricated and pulled out, the car burst out in flames. None of the bystanders could do anything.

Zo was removed to the hospital, and for three days she was kept on sedatives, because whenever she regained consciousness, she would enquire about Kapoor and nobody would dare tell her that Kapoor was dead, long before she was even brought to the hospital.

On the fourth day, early in the morning, Father Jacob who

## ZORAMTHANGI

had spent every one of his waking hours by the bedside of Zo, saw that she was sleeping, blissfully unaware of the tragedy that had befallen her. He got up and went out. The Doctor who was looking after Zo was sitting in his room, preparing to leave after his night duty.

Father Jacob asked him : "Doctor, how do you think Zoramthangi is faring ?"

"I think she has done very well so far. There are no serious physical injuries. But the dangerous moment will come when she is told of the death of her husband."

"Yes. You have already kept her on sedation for three days. How much longer can she go on like this ?"

"Father, I am afraid not much longer."

"Yes, I personally feel the sooner, the better."

"I think, Doctor, she is a very brave girl. The Almighty in His great wisdom decided that the poor girl should go through further suffering. When she comes to know what has happened, He will give her strength to bear it also. What can we mortals do ?"

Then he made up his mind. He must perform this task :

"If you are going to tell her, I will stay on as long as necessary."

When Father Jacob entered the room, Zo was stirring. In a few minutes she opened her eyes and looked around, frightened. When she saw Father Jacob, she relaxed immediately. Calmly she said : "Father, I know that something has gone wrong with Ajai. I have been having bad dreams about him. What is it ? Please, don't hide anything. Please."

## *DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS*

Father Jacob looked at her, and saw tears brimming into her eyes. Why, why had God done it to her? But He had His own ways and no man understood them. He braced himself. When he spoke, it was slowly but clearly :

“My dear, Ajai has gone for his eternal salvation. He is no more.”

The little ray of hope that was there in the eyes of Zo went out. Quietly, the tears grew and rolled down her cheeks. She cried first slowly, then uncontrollably. Father Jacob got up, sat on her bed, and put one hand on her shoulders. Nobody spoke. Minutes passed by. It was maybe ten, twenty or thirty minutes later, that Zo spoke. She spoke with an effort and in a monotone : “How did it happen ?”

Father Jacob gave her the details of the grenade attack on the car.

“What is the date today ?”

“Today is the 22nd.”

“Four days have passed ! That means I can’t even see him. Why did it have to happen, Father ?”

“Oh, my dear, I think God is testing you.”

“Poor Ajai, how he must have suffered in those last few moments.”

“He died instantaneously,” said Father Jacob slowly.

“Father, I truly wish I had died with him. Now there is nothing more left for me in life. He gave my life a purpose, he gave meaning to everything I did. He was so good, so kind and so loving...that I feared this every moment. And it has now finally

## ZORAMTHANGI

happened.. So soon.” So saying, she started getting up from the bed but Father Jacob restrained her.

Zo said : “I see no light. I see no object in my existence. Whatever I touched turned to stone, whoever I loved, died. I am accursed Father, and I have no right live.”

Father Jacob spoke again and his voice suddenly assumed a soothing, serene quality : “In moments of stress, it is the chosen of God who see the right path and have the courage to follow it. You are a child of the Universe, no less than the trees and the stars ! You have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, the Universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore, be at peace with God, whatever your labours and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace with your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and shattered dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be careful. Strive to be happy.”

It was then that the idea of opening a school in the memory of Ajai, struck Zo. She said slowly :

“Father, I want to make Ajai’s name unforgettable so that people will remember his spirit. I will open a school in his name.”

“My daughter, you have been through a lot of pain. But let me tell you now that you are a very brave girl. I know that you will bear your tragedy with fortitude. Yes, go ahead. Open the school. I will do all that I can to help. Let your school show the people, the people who have gone astray, the path of love and understanding. Let us produce citizens who will dispel the clouds of darkness.”

“I will name it ‘The Ajai Memorial School’,” Said Zo.